

**A CONSTRUCTION OF THE PAST: THE MEMORY AND THOUGHT OF  
HERBERT RAVENEL SASS, ARCHIBALD RUTLEDGE, AND BEN  
ROBERTSON**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**In**

**HISTORY**

**By**

**ALAN JAMES HARRELSON  
DECEMBER 2009**

**At**

**THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE COLLEGE OF CHARLESTON AND  
THE CITADEL**

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## **ABSTRACT**

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Being a work of southern intellectual history, this thesis explores the twentieth century literature of three South Carolina authors. The writings of Herbert Ravenel Sass, Archibald Rutledge, and Ben Robertson illustrate the existence of a literary movement within interwar South Carolina in favor of the southern conservative ethos. After 1930, the Vanderbilt Agrarian movement began to wane quickly as its organization shattered. Many of the Vanderbilt writers abandoned their original efforts and several eventually left the South to pursue careers elsewhere. In South Carolina, a noticeable movement continued well into the 1950s. The Agrarians presented disparate and confusing arguments occasionally in favor of a southern yeoman culture, and at other times a culture of large estates and planters, two notions that created two disparate ideas of the South. The Carolina authors, with the qualified exception of Ben Robertson, overwhelmingly promoted a set of aristocratic values and a memory of the plantation aristocracy. To them, an image and conception of the plantation was the primary, defining feature of South Carolina's southern past. My argument that a cohesive traditionalist literary movement existed in South Carolina rests upon the significant degree to which these authors promoted this vision of the state's past, an encompassing vision that described the origins and character of what they sought to conserve.

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In 1969, Professor George C. Rogers, in his *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* told the memorable story of Caroline Gilman and her impressions of beleaguered Charleston, South Carolina during the spring of 1865. Caroline, widow of Samuel Gilman, had passed the war years in the Carolina Upcountry. After the southern defeat, she returned home to Charleston. Along the way through the Carolina farmlands, she noticed the pervasive destruction and degradation four years of war had bestowed upon her state. Columbia particularly witnessed the affects of war. Most of the city had been destroyed. And Charleston, the once elegant city of a planter's society now lay in rubble. As many southerners pondered their new political and social situation, Caroline inscribed in her diary, "I could not help thinking yesterday, as I saw the flowers look up and smile when the superincumbent weight and decay and ruin were removed, that they set us a good example politically. But then, flowers have no memory."<sup>1</sup>

Caroline's conception of memory and its impact upon the southern genius mirrored that of South Carolina's conservative authors during the 1930s and 40s. Acting upon a particular understanding of Southern history, southern conservative authors in interwar South Carolina published both fiction and non-fiction works that identified the South as a social reality replete with a distinct culture and valuable tradition. Select writings of Ben Robertson, Archibald Rutledge, and Herbert Ravenel Sass demonstrate how culture and tradition informed conservative South Carolina authors during the Southern Renaissance.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> George C. Rogers, *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 169.

<sup>2</sup>The Southern Renaissance was a reinvigoration of southern literature beginning in the 1920s. It became the literary expression of a traditional South challenged by secular and modern developments.

Many outstanding works have recently been published regarding the role of memory in the South, including Fitzhugh Brundage's *Southern Past*. Whereas Brundage is mostly concerned with describing a social history of memory within the South, and in what ways communities displayed memories through publicity, this study examines how historical memory and understanding influenced and operated within a circle of literary artists, and how individuals conceived of culture and identity. Nonetheless, despite the variant approach, my conclusions open debate with those of Brundage. He asserted that his account "is not intended to endorse Shelby Foote's suggestion that the defeat of the southern rebellion is the defining theme of southern historical memory." Brundage continued, "But of more profound importance for the historical memory of the South was the destruction of slavery and the freed people's acquisition of citizenship."<sup>3</sup> The problem with either perspective is that one must first presume that there existed a singular historical memory within the South after the Civil War. Regardless as to which theme might have been correct, there can be no defining singular theme, for people remember the past differently. A study of a particular group of individuals within a single southern state provides a more accurate picture where a theme might be understood to have existed. At this smaller level, similarities may be drawn more easily. Bearing this in mind, Robertson, Sass, and Rutledge in fact viewed Confederate defeat as one if not the central event of southern history, with repercussions strongly realized during their own time. For them, Foote's suggestion applied, and with vigor.

A study of the southern past must consider the ways in which it was remembered, evaluated, and reshaped for further transmission by the writers and intellectuals of the

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<sup>3</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 8.

Southern Renaissance. Any text or story generated by the impulse of historical consciousness constructs the past in a form deemed proper by those who create them. It is not the purpose here to present the writings of these South Carolinians as the most significant or even the most appropriate representation of the meaning and lessons of the southern experience. The southern past looks different to different people. Bearing this in mind, a selection of specific cases coupled with a discussion of their similarities and differences may provide clues about the role of cultural values in constructing and articulating a memory of the past. The literature of Robertson, Rutledge, and Sass produced during the 1930s and 40s suggests a movement of southern memory and thought suffused by an ideology of devotion towards a southern tradition. Their writings were intended to guide and motivate. It was their purpose to articulate and reaffirm a southern culture and identity.

The writings of Herbert Ravenel Sass, Archibald Rutledge, and Ben Robertson illustrate the existence of a literary movement within interwar South Carolina in favor of the southern conservative ethos. All three understood a tradition of southern conservative thought. To provide a definition of southern conservatism is to describe an intricately constructed complexity. Southern conservatism existed first from 1789-1865, when agrarian republicanism and limited constitutional government were the primary tenets, and then from 1865 through the civil rights movement, when the preservation of historical consciousness and the *status quo antebellum* became the primary tenets. It was the intent of southern conservatism to preserve the traditions of the southern way of life.

This tradition that these three South Carolina authors understood constituted many things: a fear of unnecessary social and political change, defiance towards external

authority, a steadfast commitment to the accomplishments of previous generations (both European and American), an earnest desire to adhere to the highest standards and ideals, an ardent and life-long attachment to Christian oriented society, an overwhelming sense of place and belonging, honor and integrity, private ownership of property, self-determination, and a genteel and amiable environment in which to practice the arts of conversation, hospitality, and an ancient conviviality. Though southern conservative thought was written about within the intellectual sphere, among those who lived the life of the mind, it was also, and indeed more importantly, a physical and mental reality that suffused the identity and culture of the South. John C. Calhoun maintained that the South had always been and will always be the conservative portion of the union. Not only that, but for southern conservatives, the South was the most lovely portion of the union. As Burke wrote, “for us to love our country, our country ought to be lovely.” Generally, it was this “loveliness” that the South so desperately strived to protect, and *conserve*.<sup>4</sup> Nowhere is this more obvious than in the writings of Sass, Rutledge, and Robertson.

It may be asked, and understandably so, that if the South became the conservative portion, what were the threats affronting this southern tradition, and where were they coming from? Prior to 1861, southern conservatism originated and existed as a political and intellectual response to the potential augmentation of northern and federal power. However, southern conservatism as it existed after the war and reconstruction was a response to threats of a different, yet similar sort. Rather than the potential growth of what was perceived as conflicting and harmful Northern and federal interests, the threat

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<sup>4</sup>John C. Calhoun in the United States Senate, February 19 1847, *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, vol. 24, ed. Clyde N. Wilson, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 172; Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 29.

became the reality of a centralized power structure unfamiliar and unconcerned with the preservation of the South's agrarian republicanism. Southern conservatism after the war was no longer primarily political in nature. It had assumed more of an ideological and social concentration. The threat would eventually become modernity itself, as the southern tradition, as Richard Weaver wrote, was increasingly viewed "at bay." Sass, Rutledge, and Robertson were concerned with providing a literary articulation of the southern way of life, but more importantly, they created a determined appeal to those southerners who had neglected and repudiated that tradition as a supposedly obsolete and superfluous canon of ideas.

Rather than study the degree to which the writings of Robertson, Rutledge, and Sass were based upon historical evidence, which is beside the point, the focus here is upon how and why they reassessed the southern tradition. For my purposes, in the case of Rutledge and Robertson, their literary reaction took the form of published memoirs and personal recollections. Sass's reaction, however, was through his published novel and historical essays. Fitzhugh Brundage has noted, "...the study of memory can challenge the conventions of history writing by providing access to facets of the past long since obscured by the dominant versions of history." Eugene Genovese has written of historians' treatment of the southern conservative tradition, "...its principle features are, at this moment, being obscured if not ignored."<sup>5</sup> This is not a study that asks a question about a particular event, place, or figure of history, but rather how the idea of southern conservatism during the 1930s and 40s remembered the events, places, and figures of the

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<sup>5</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 22; Eugene Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievements and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 1.



southern experience. The question here is not whether this image as described by Robertson, Rutledge, and Sass ever existed. They believed it did. What is more important is the overwhelming extent to which historical consciousness, what John Lukacs called “the remembered past,” informed and directed the writings of these men, and how their writings observed southern history and identity.

Historian Jack Irby Hayes attempted to place 1930s South Carolina into its proper context. “More so than any other state, South Carolina in 1933 was Dixie, the land of cotton.... Two generations later, South Carolina was America.” He attributed these changes more to the Second World War than the New Deal and concluded that the New Deal was “the last decade of an old era and not the first decade of a new one.”<sup>6</sup> The state was still very much agrarian in nature; more than half of the population were farmers, living off the land and practicing a high level of self-sufficient agriculture. Modern appliances and technological conveniences were for most intents and purposes unknown, unattainable, or merely undesired by many of the state’s overwhelming majority of rural dwellers. The memory of the Civil War, although faded as a result of Benjamin Ryan Tillman’s demagoguery, was just as fresh in the minds of many as it was with Caroline Gilman in the spring of 1865. There remained a deferential hierarchical society based upon degrees of wealth and differences in race, and the Democratic Party of the Solid South maintained the allegiance of the white voting population. Keeping with its Old South history, South Carolina remained in many ways, although not all, impervious to change during the 1930s.

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<sup>6</sup> Jack Irby Hayes, *South Carolina and the New Deal* (Columbia: USC Press, 2001), xii.

Historian Jack Temple Kirby has used the term “Old New South” to describe the region between 1865 and 1940. “Industrial production workers did not outnumber farmers until the late 1940s, and a majority of the southern population did not become urban until the 1950s.”<sup>7</sup> Thus the New South as proclaimed by the prescient progressives during the nineteenth century did not occur until after the Second World War. It is clear that Robertson, Sass, and Rutledge recognized the overwhelmingly rural character of the interwar period South as something fundamental to the region, a character they unmistakably illustrated in their writings.

They contributed to a debate the Vanderbilt Agrarians had popularized by 1930. Be that as it may, there were important differences between the Agrarians and the “Carolina school,” as I shall call it. With the exception of Andrew Lytle, who I shall quote occasionally hereafter to note significant similarities between him and the Carolina school, the Agrarians lived the academic life of the mind with little actual exposure to life on the land. Many of the Carolina writers, however, provided celebratory literary images of the rural South based upon real experiences of rural life and through these images a description or picture of South Carolina’s southern culture based predominantly upon established agrarian customs. Another point of difference rests upon the fact that the Carolina school’s sense of place stemmed from their familiarity with a single southern state; the Agrarians came from all parts of the larger American South and did not possess the singular cohesiveness of the South Carolinians. After 1930, the Vanderbilt Agrarian movement began to wane quickly as its organization shattered. Many of the Vanderbilt writers abandoned their original efforts and several eventually left the South to pursue

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South, 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), xiv.

careers elsewhere. In South Carolina, a noticeable movement continued well into the 1950s. The Agrarians presented disparate and confusing arguments occasionally in favor of a southern yeoman culture, and at other times a culture of large estates and planters, two notions that created two disparate ideas of the South. The Carolina authors, with the qualified exception of Ben Robertson, overwhelmingly promoted a set of aristocratic values and a memory of the plantation aristocracy. To them, an image and conception of the plantation was the primary, defining feature of South Carolina's southern past. My argument that a cohesive traditionalist literary movement existed in South Carolina rests upon the significant degree to which these authors promoted this vision of the state's past, an encompassing vision that described the origins and character of what they sought to conserve.

The main southern conservative idea made famous during this period by the Vanderbilt Agrarians was to advocate a southern tradition and way of life that existed in opposition to mainstream American business culture. They drew striking distinctions between the two and labeled the southern way as agrarian and the American as industrial. It was not their purpose to propose a new Southern Confederacy, but they did believe the moral, social, and value systems of the Old South should be continued. The Agrarians wrote their 1930 manifesto in strict and calculated opposition to the South's growing tendency to join the American ideal of modernity. Originally titled *Tracts Against Communism, I'll Take My Stand* understood American industrialization as a path to a government controlled economic system akin to that imposed upon Russia in 1917. Agrarianism of this form repudiated American consumerism and materialism. It noticed modern advertising and salesmanship as a more significant development of

industrialization; Americans, including a growing number of southerners, were being persuaded to buy superfluous material goods and to live beyond their means.<sup>8</sup>

John Crowe Ransom's essay in the manifesto, "Reconstructed but Unregenerate," elaborated the Agrarians' ideas about the place of the traditional South within a broad historical context. Ransom wrote, "The Southerner must know, and in fact he does very well know, that his antique conservatism does not exert a great influence against the American progressivist doctrine. The Southern idea today is down, and the American or progressive idea is up." Ransom's thesis was that the South was unique for having perpetuated the traditional culture of the Old World in the New. For him, England was the model society embraced by the South. The Old South then "practiced the contrary and European philosophy of establishment as the foundation of the life of the spirit." To Ransom, the defeat of the Confederacy by the United States created two major problems. First, the southern tradition had been greatly impaired and had been unable to gain influence or offer an example of its philosophy. Secondly, the American progressivism had developed into industrialization without any possible check from the conservative South. The question in 1930 for Ransom was "whether the South will permit herself to be so industrialized as to lose entirely her historic identity." Simply put, the Agrarians attempted to preserve southern distinctiveness.<sup>9</sup>

M. E. Bradford described the idea of European influence upon the traditional South, a theme noticeable in both the Vanderbilt Agrarian and Carolina schools of thought.

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed description of the Vanderbilt Agrarians' ideas, see "Introduction: Statement of Principles" in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> John Crowe Ransom, "Unreconstructed but Unregenerate" in *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 1-27.

Bradford was a neo-agrarian who taught English at the University of Dallas until his death in the early 1990s. Bradford understood the American Revolution as a period when southerners did not sever their ties of heritage and culture with England; they rather took this cherished past with them. Bradford wrote it best, “American separatism from England was a constitutional act within a larger English political tradition, made in the name of self-preservation for the legitimate status of an extant order; a repetition of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, not an innovation.”<sup>10</sup> From this perspective, the colonial experience of English rule and the Revolutionary secession from English authority created a southern conservative tradition within the much older form of English culture and society. It was therefore an amputation that was desired, not to sever the American States from the political inheritance, but to cut the disease of tyranny from the English tradition of responsible government and communal liberty.

This interpretation contradicts sharply that of Gordon S. Wood, one of the more accomplished scholars of the Revolutionary period. It was Professor Wood’s contention that the Revolution was the most radical event in American history, and that American society, both North and South, had been altered significantly as a result. Wood also wrote, “The Revolution not only changed the culture of Americans, but even altered their understanding of history, knowledge, and truth.”<sup>11</sup> For Bradford, an assertion of this nature should be considered merely whimsical and founded upon little reality. The mistake that Wood made is a presumption that New England was and is America.

Regardless as to whether the North wanted to sever all ties with an English past, the

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<sup>10</sup> M.E. Bradford, *The Reactionary Imperative: Essays Literary and Political* (Peru, Illinois: Sherwood Sugdon, 1990), 122.

<sup>11</sup> Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 8.

South, which produced the author of the Declaration, the military victory over the British, and the Virginia dynasty of presidents, did not. Bradford viewed the original and basic difference between the earliest North and the earliest South to be the latter's desire and actual ability to transplant a purely English and well-established character upon its own culture and society; there was never any notion of creating something from nothing. Bradford used this highly pertinent analogy: "The plantation of Virginia will be new in the sense of extension or re-creation, as Rome was a fresh but minimally different Troy, made out of the residue from a particular stream of history and for the sake of its perpetuation."<sup>12</sup> This was much different than the idea of America as a city upon a hill, a beacon of light in a world of darkness that developed in the northeast. It is this interpretation of the Revolution, the one that sees New England as America, which overshadows the vast disparity in ideology and identity that produced a gulf of cultural differences between what Calhoun often called the two great sections of the union.

It must be remembered that it was the agrarian culture and Renaissance heritage of seventeenth and eighteenth century England that the South attempted to preserve in America, not the industrial society of the nineteenth century British Empire. This was the understanding of the Agrarian and Carolina schools, an understanding that William Taylor so ably explained many years ago. Taylor elucidated that Virginia and the Carolinas maintained strict and beneficial relationships with the old world during the colonial period, more so than the northern colonies could have desired. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the situation was completely reversed. The North had become industrialized and had to a large extent adopted the egalitarian and democratic

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<sup>12</sup>M.E. Bradford, *A Better Guide than Reason* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 172.

ideas of the French Revolution. The South remained agrarian, provincial, and committed to an established “way”; it did not change with the tide, but rather defended itself against it. Taylor wrote, “The cosmopolitan outlook of the Revolutionary generation was communicated to a bare handful of southerners who attempted to carry on the older traditions of the coastal South in the face of growing obstacles.”<sup>13</sup> The same may be said of the Carolina school during the 1930s and 40s.

There were many ideological challenges to the South recognized by southern conservatives of this period. It was the acknowledgement of these challenges that created a need in the mind of southern conservatives to articulate and reaffirm, for those interested, particularly the young and native southerners, a southern tradition and position obviously separate from that of mainstream American identity. The Vanderbilt Agrarians argued against the tendency of young southerners to adopt the American industrial ideal. John Crowe Ransom wrote, “The younger Southerners, who are being converted frequently to the industrial gospel, must come back to the support of the Southern tradition.” Ransom also maintained that southern youth “must be persuaded to look very critically at the advantages of becoming a ‘new South’ which will be only an undistinguished replica of the usual industrial community.”<sup>14</sup> Thus to the Agrarians, in 1930, the New South had not yet arrived; it was still something they thought could be avoided at that point. But if it were to be avoided at all, southern youth would have to understand and advocate the southern tradition.

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<sup>13</sup> William R. Taylor, *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and the American National Character* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), 37.

<sup>14</sup> *I'll Take My Stand*, xlii.

As the Mississippi writer William Alexander Percy wrote in 1941, “In the South our anxiety is not to find new ideas, but to bring to realization old ones which have been tested and proven by years of anguish- a far more difficult undertaking.”<sup>15</sup> Percy also acknowledged a paucity of interest among southerners, especially youth, to embrace their tradition. “During my day I have witnessed a disintegration of that moral cohesion of the South which had given it its strength and its sons their singleness of purpose and simplicity. Today, there is fretting and fuming on the part of the young people over what they should do....”<sup>16</sup> It was Richard Weaver who wrote that tradition “means a recognizable pattern of belief and behavior transmitted from one generation to the next.” Perhaps the idea that the southern pattern was not being satisfactorily transmitted to the younger generation is what is meant by Weaver’s title *The Southern Tradition at Bay*.<sup>17</sup>

And at bay it most certainly was, intellectually speaking. Part of the purpose of Agrarian writers contributing to the Southern Renaissance was to help readers to know the South and its traditions in the face of formidable intellectual challenges. In the wake of the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, there was concern that science was replacing faith, and that secular humanism was providing too much of a challenge to religious orthodoxy. Of course, all this led to the development of the agrarian movement and its 1930 manifesto *I’ll Take My Stand*. As the symposium’s statement of principles asserted, “The

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<sup>15</sup> William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter’s Son*, Library of Southern Civilization Edition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 229.

<sup>16</sup> Percy, 74.

<sup>17</sup>Weaver stated that the South, with its heritage and tradition, had been “half lost, derided, betrayed by its own sons.” He fundamentally understood that tradition must be transmitted. He feared, however, that in the South, this was not occurring sufficiently to safeguard the continued existence of a meaningful conservative ethos. Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay: A History of Postbellum Thought* (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1968), 29, 391.



theory of agrarianism is that the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations.”<sup>18</sup> This was also the understanding of Sass, Rutledge, and Robertson. They were fully cognizant of the debate sparked by the Vanderbilt Agrarians, and they were certainly aware of their contributions in favor of this interpretation.

The Carolina school acknowledged the criticisms of the rest of America. Robert Brinkmeyer made a point about the 1930s South, “Except for the years immediately leading up to the Civil War, the South had probably never seemed to the rest of America quite so alien, threatening, and dangerous.... Rather than rational, the South appeared irrational, sunk in a miasma of local customs, beliefs, and superstitions that were never going to change, no matter what anybody said about evolution or anything else.”<sup>19</sup> Sass recognized this same parallel in 1955, much later in his career, “We have only ourselves to rely upon, and I think that realization is bringing Southerners together to an extent unknown since the Sixties....”<sup>20</sup> A literary parallel exists as well. Just as William Gilmore Simms had articulated the history and traditions of South Carolina during the nineteenth century in the face of mounting criticism, Robertson, Sass, and Rutledge contributed to a growing southern conservative literary canon that developed a movement to describe the virtues of southern culture and identity. The writings of these three serve as tributes or memorials to the southern communities of their youth and before, and to the southern past they imagined and understood.

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<sup>18</sup> *I'll Take My Stand*, li.

<sup>19</sup> Robert H. Brinkmeyer, *The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930-1950* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Ravenel Sass to Margaret Coit, 22 August 1955, Personal Correspondence, 1910-1957, Sass Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

To place the Carolina school into its proper historical context, one must consider the character of the interwar period and the different intellectual currents that had gained predominance. Whereas Europe and the American North had witnessed the ramifications of humanist ideas, the South appeared anomalous as one of the final western strongholds of an ancient conservatism that had repudiated the egalitarian ideas of the French Revolution. Southern conservatives of this period continued looking back towards ancient and medieval history, a history the French Revolution viewed as antiquated and useless. The South existed as the area of the United States most adamantly opposed to collectivism, the term economist Friedrich von Hayek used to describe the government-controlled economies of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Southern conservatives also viewed Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal as far too collectivist and beyond the purpose of the federal government. The old southern fear of consolidation, a concern South Carolinians had historically reacted upon, became a topic of debate once again. With the advent of powerful totalitarian regimes in Europe, southern conservatives understood the European culmination of socialism as an affront not only to classical liberalism, but also to the South's particularly historical conception of that term.

James Cobb has observed, "The history of southern identity is not a story of continuity *versus* change, but continuity *within* it."<sup>21</sup> South Carolina of the 1930s maintained a uniquely southern identity. Sass often wrote, as will be shown, of his belief that his state was the arbiter of southern politics during the late antebellum period. But Sass's generation was more aware of this than the state's younger population. Southern identity was changing through the younger people, and it was our authors' objective to

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<sup>21</sup> James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

preserve a degree of continuity within these adjustments. Thus Cobb's assertion is particularly applicable to Robertson, Sass, and Rutledge. Their writings reveal an attempt to describe the history, culture, and identity of the South within a personal and familial context. This was also their understanding of the southern past; they sought to provide continuity of culture and identity between their experiences and that of their forbears. In the words of Richard King, "The object of their historical consciousness was a tradition whose essential figures were the father and the grandfather and whose essential structure was the literal and symbolic family."<sup>22</sup>

Charles J. Holden, in his *In the Great Maelstrom*, discussed South Carolina conservative thought during the postbellum period. Holden observed, "The conservative school underwent renovation from time to time, but crucial parts of the original structure remained intact from 1860 to the 1940s." Bearing James Cobb's point in mind, the continuity of a southern conservative tradition seemed adaptable to certain change within this time frame. The state during the 1930s was certainly not the war-weary community of its 1860s, but a tradition based upon South Carolina's role in southern history remained fundamental to the state's southern identity. Contrary to Fitzhugh Brundage's generalized conclusions, whereas the existence of slavery was one of the primary characteristics of the state prior to 1861, the prior existence of a Southern Confederacy became the defining characteristic of the state after Appomattox. Holden wrote, "Scholars of tradition have observed that core values and lessons of a tradition are always being reevaluated through time by its followers." Part of the current purpose is to examine how our three figures did just that. Whereas Holden accomplished a history of

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<sup>22</sup> Richard King, *A Southern Renaissance: The Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 7.

South Carolina's conservative mind from the end of the Civil War to the start of the Second World War, this study focuses upon a much more narrow period of the state's history. The perspective is here that of the literary artists rather than the more recognized conservative community leaders. Holden examined "how conservatives made sense of their world," the current treatment has as its primary focus the published works of three professional literary artists, whose main purpose was to articulate and reaffirm, not to make sensible, an established southern culture and identity.<sup>23</sup>

It is desirous that this treatment of three writers of the Carolina school will contribute to an ongoing historical discussion that seeks to restore the relationship between southern literature and historiography. The works of William R. Taylor, Louis D. Rubin, Richard Gray, Michael O'Brien, and Eugene Genovese have proved instrumental in shaping this discussion; the current study concurs with their conclusions, and its approach owes a debt to their accomplishments. As Rubin averred about southern literature, "One is dealing not with an idea, or a body of literary knowledge, but an experience; the South *is*. And *was*. The fascination with the literature is that it mirrors, more than that, it orders and articulates, a living human community." O'Brien recognized the need to reconstruct the relationship between history and literary criticism, the mutual foundation of southern culture, "For awhile the critic needs to listen to the historian, just as once the historian needs to listen to the critic. And the urgency of this resides in the belief that history, the novel, poetry, and criticism are at bottom the same venture, all branches of literature." Reflecting this understanding, I maintain that Robertson, Sass, and Rutledge provide an image of South Carolina's southern culture and identity germane to the historiography.

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<sup>23</sup> Charles J. Holden, *In the Great Maelstrom: Conservatives in Post Civil War South Carolina* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 1-12.

Their literary articulations of southern history, identity, and culture provide clues about what the South meant to at least some South Carolinians during the years surrounding the Second World War.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Louis D. Rubin, *The History of Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) xi; Michael O'Brien, *Rethinking the South: Essays in Intellectual History* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 7.

## CHAPTER ONE

### A CHARACTER OF THE LOWCOUNTRY: HERBERT RAVENEL SASS

Herbert Ravenel Sass was born at 23 Legare Street in Charleston on November 2, 1884. South Carolina gentility, which Wade Hampton represented as the last statesman of a dying order, had succumbed to the demagoguery of Benjamin Ryan Tillman, then governor for the state during the time of Sass's birth. Herbert's father, George Herbert Sass, married Anna Eliza Ravenel, also of Charleston. Both families had been in South Carolina since the American Revolution. Herbert's maternal grandmother, Harriet Horry Rutledge Ravenel, was the great-granddaughter of Eliza Lucas Pinckney, as well as an accomplished author. Sass's grandmother wrote *Charleston: The Place and the People* in 1906. Years later, Sass would write of his grandmother, "Mrs. Ravenel was a stately and exquisite lady whose memory went back to that golden age when the great rice plantations were at the zenith of their prosperity and the ante-bellum civilization of South Carolina, one of the most gallant and glamorous that this country has known, was in flower." Drawing her experiences closer to his, Sass continued, "Of that civilization she was a product; and having known her, I know how fine a thing that civilization was before war blighted it...."<sup>25</sup> Sass was fascinated by science and literature and graduated with a degree in English from the College of Charleston in 1905. He completed a Master's degree in Biology the next year.

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<sup>25</sup> Biographical note for *The American Magazine*, June 2 1927, Personal Correspondence, 1910-1957, Sass Papers, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina.

Sass was a man who enjoyed his natural surroundings. He wrote prolifically of nature and gained a reputation early as a southern naturalist. Sass's *The Way of the Wild* was published in 1925 and many of his essays were released by national publications such as *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Harper's*, *Colliers*, and *Good Housekeeping*. His forte had not been political treatises, but rather the writing of beauty; Sass was most of all concerned with expressing his ardor towards his native state, and was most desirous for others to recognize these natural aesthetics as well. Barbara Bellows wrote of Sass, "Love of the Carolina Lowcountry- its natural environment, its people and its history- was the animating emotion that defined Sass as a man and as a writer."<sup>26</sup> Sass himself noted in 1943, "Charleston and the Carolina Low Country have an extraordinary grip on the affections of those who are fortunate enough to be born there. I am among those fortunate ones and have never wished to live anywhere else because there seems to be no other place to be compared with this one."<sup>27</sup> John Bennett wrote to Sass in 1933, at the height of Sass's influence as a literary artist, "On your native soil, within the circle of your own warm affections and keen observation, no one will pretend to cope with you. You have there a wide range of really noble beauty in this world around us, over which your pen has an acknowledged mastery...."<sup>28</sup> The Carolina Lowcountry, with its dignified architecture, abandoned rice fields, and grandiloquent gentility was for Sass the exemplary remnant community of the Old South; this was the southern image he admired and understood. It was the image he sought to articulate through his writings.

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<sup>26</sup> Barbara Bellows, introduction to *Look Back to Glory* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2005), 11.

<sup>27</sup> Biographical note for *Harper's*, March 1943, Sass Papers, SCHS.

<sup>28</sup> John Bennett to Sass, 11 February 1933, Sass Papers, SCHS.

It was, however, the Great War and the subsequent materialism of the 1920s that induced Sass, not unlike the Agrarians, to write more particularly of the South and the importance of its traditions. The scene of his understanding was always South Carolina. It was through the experiences of his state that Sass interpreted the meaning of a southern tradition. Sass recognized a need for this tradition to be articulated through writing, and during the 1930s, his most famous works were lasting products of this effort. He assisted with the editing and wrote the leading article in *The Carolina Lowcountry*, published in 1931. Sass published *Look Back to Glory* in 1933. His novel focused upon Charleston plantation society of the late antebellum period and its reaction to the Civil War. He continued this theme in 1935 by contributing the text to *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, a joint endeavor with Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, Charleston's most famous artist of the period, whose paintings were featured during the first half of the book.

*Look Back to Glory* is Sass's most famous work. As two historical novels written during times of change, Walter Scott's *Waverly* and Sass's Civil War account were similar in purpose. Walter Scott wrote *Waverly* in 1814 as the first historical novel. Claire Lamont of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne revealed an interpretation of Scott's novel that is applicable to Sass's of 1933, "*Waverly* caught its public at an opportune moment. As its popularity showed, readers were ready for another look at the past, not the misty past of Ossian nor the dusty past of the antiquary, but the past of their great-grandfathers, which the ideologies of the late eighteenth century had led them to discredit."<sup>29</sup> From this quote one may glean a similar condition for orthodoxy and tradition within the interwar South. Sass was concerned about the potential spread of

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<sup>29</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *Waverly*, edited by Claire Lamont, Oxford Classics Edition (New York: Oxford University Press), x.



New South ideology and the possibility of southerners becoming apostates. It was time, according to Sass, for South Carolina to return to the principles of the Old South.<sup>30</sup> While Walter Scott wrote his account of the Jacobite rising of 1745, sixty-nine years after the event, Sass wrote of the Confederate War, ending his novel with a bombardment of Fort Sumter in 1864, an occurrence sixty-nine years removed from Sass's publication. Sass was in essence similar to Scott, providing another look at the past.

*Look Back to Glory* is replete with images of southern chivalry, romance, and beauty, as Sass understood them. Richard Acton of Avalon plantation provides the window through which Sass desired his readers to view the Carolina Lowcountry during its "Golden Age," as Sass was prone to call it. The novel begins with a list of quotes from Jefferson Davis, James Henry Hammond, Robert Barnwell Rhett, and others, figures of history who Sass admired. The quotes are accurate, and may be located within the historical record. Along with this authenticity, Sass included quotes from his fictional characters, in effect placing their thoughts within the story, and thus set the stage by creating his figures as contemporaries of Hammond and Rhett. Richard Acton said, "There is going to come, I am more than ever afraid, an end of our Golden Age- that Golden Age of many things in which you people are living in Carolina on the great plantations like Avalon, and the too proud, too confident, ever beloved Charleston."<sup>31</sup> This was Sass speaking through his character Richard. It is clear that Sass admired the character of the Old South, revered the position of the Confederacy, and deplored its failure to achieve victory. Through Richard, Sass revealed his understanding of the

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<sup>30</sup> Sass to John Bennett, 12 February 1933, Sass Papers, SCHS.

<sup>31</sup> Herbert Ravenel Sass, *Look Back to Glory* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1933), x.

southern past. It is that figure within the novel, more so than the others, that Sass used to reflect his own thoughts.

Although the plot focuses upon the romance of Richard towards Diane Rowland, who is engaged to James Hail, the story progresses upon the stage of secession and war, events pivotal to the outcome of the novel. Occasionally Sass interjects his thoughts about the war period, again using Richard Acton. After Richard returns from a rather extended visit of several years in France, he notices an impending doom for the plantation society he knew as a boy in South Carolina. The commodious country homes as centers of great land-holdings, the smaller residencies as property of the yeomanry, the grandiloquent presence of Charleston as the wellspring of the region's intellectual and social vigor: these are the things Richard recognizes as soon to be lost. He asks himself how long will it last, Avalon and the surrounding dwellings. He ponders the rice lands, ripe under acres of cultivation. He thinks of the genteel conduct and decorum long inherent within this exemplar of southern society. For Richard, and thus Sass, South Carolina's position within the Old South was that of continuum and tradition; what had been established in the state was a representative community of all that had been accomplished in western civilization.<sup>32</sup>

During another of his tangents, Sass placed Richard once again on the philosopher's bench, and displays an imagery of the Carolina position. "It was paradise, he said to himself, this Carolina LowCountry- a paradise for those who were privileged to enjoy the blessings it afforded." In Richard's mind, it was the most important area of America at this time; the dispute between the two great sections of the union was focused upon this

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<sup>32</sup> Sass, *Look Back to Glory*, 25.

state. The southern leadership came from South Carolina, and particularly Charleston, where the vast cotton and rice lands surrounded the city like a nation-state of antiquity. There was an agrarian-feudal society akin to that of the Old World, a society ruled by an aristocratic elite who based their power upon the acquisition of land, and yet more land. Richard understands that it must be changed or destroyed. Speaking again of Carolina, “But for many years it had fixed the thought and action of the South as effectually as Athens had controlled Greece; and while it lasted, the land where it flowered was, for its rulers at any rate, perhaps the most delightful land under the sun.” For Sass at least, South Carolina was the embodiment of the best of western culture.<sup>33</sup>

If South Carolina was an embodiment, Charleston was the obdurate source of southern insistence upon a particular way of life. “Charleston wasn’t wood or stone; it wasn’t a place or a name; it was a symbol and a spirit.” All that Sass had known, all that his immediate ancestors had known, was Charleston and the life that it bestowed upon them. Legare Street is where Sass was born, lived, and died; there is a definite sense of place and belonging within his writings. The war had proven to be the nadir of the city’s existence in Sass’s mind. Richard Acton ponders to himself of Charleston, “It was the heart, the capital of the plantations; all that Carolina was and had been from the beginning lived in it and gave it form and meaning.”<sup>34</sup> Sass’s understanding of the southern past placed his city upon a pedestal of demanded reverence and awe.

Throughout the novel it is apparent that Sass was fully cognizant of the history of the South, the Civil War, and its resulting consequences for the South and Charleston. This

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<sup>33</sup> Sass, *Look Back to Glory*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> Sass, *Look Back to Glory*, 272.

was no piece of fiction predicated upon lack of knowledge, but rather an astute familiarity with the historical events of the mid-nineteenth century.

Sass viewed the history of the war that had been adopted by southerners as fallacious and misinformed. He hints at this through his character Richard. Sass created in his fictional character a prescient ability to predict what had by the 1930s become the bane of the South and its ability to maintain its tradition. Richard reflects on the future of the South and South Carolina during the siege of Charleston, 1864, “Something more important than the physical body of the South was perishing.” He continues his thoughts, “The South was going to discover that it had never had any great men. This conviction was going to be burnt into it with fire, driven into it with bayonets.” In the face of growing obstacles, the only vision of the South’s future was of gloom and despair, one where the history of the conflict was to be dictated to the defeated by the victors. “The South was going to be told, it was going to be made to believe, that those men had been little men, tainted men, men to be ashamed of.”<sup>35</sup> For Sass, this is precisely what had befallen the South since its defeat. He expresses weariness with any talk of southern inferiority or backwardness, and ably demonstrates with his novel an utter disdain towards not only non-southerners who attempt defamation of the region’s history, but more importantly, native Carolinians who had seemingly repudiated their history, only to fall prey to deceit and false promises of success and progress stemming from the post-1865 American order.

He continues with this point through the mind of his southern figure. Speaking of Carolinians such as Calhoun, Hammond, and Rhett, “They were going down into

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<sup>35</sup> Sass, *Look Back to Glory*, 347

oblivion with the ideal they represented, the kind of liberty they believed in.” South Carolinians would be taught that “their great love—it had been idolatry almost—of their state would be twisted into a false, a treasonable thing.” As advocates of a defeated cause, these political and military figures would be forgotten, for it would become unfashionable and unreasonable to think of secession as anything other than rebellion. The South would be thrust to credulously assert its error of the last thirty years before the war, “And the South of those thirty years preceding the war had been the South of South Carolina-- the South, it might be said, that South Carolina had made.”<sup>36</sup> It is the nature of defeat. Sass feared it, and his concern with the South’s potential to waver from its history suffuses his writings; his was an attempt, however futile, to restore recognition of a southern culture and identity based upon the collective experience of the southern people.

Sass revealed a point of his purpose in writing the novel in a letter to Alexander S. Salley. Sass measured the achievements of South Carolina between 1830 and 1865 as the state’s most accomplished and prestigious period. He used the term glorious to describe this, and expressed great concern that the majority of Americans during his time were not fully cognizant of the state’s leadership within southern history. The political treatises of Calhoun had not been studied, the purposes of secession not realized, and the cause of the South disregarded as somehow lost. To rectify this lack of knowledge in the form of fiction was, according to Sass, his purpose in writing his novel.<sup>37</sup> Sass was then, in fact, viewing his work as an informative historical novel, intended to reaffirm the

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<sup>36</sup> Sass, *Look Back to Glory*, 347.

<sup>37</sup> Sass to A.S. Salley, October 23 1933, quoted in “The Contributions of Herbert Ravenel Sass to South Carolina Literature with Particular Emphasis Upon his Nature Writings” by Grace Virginia Johnson (MA Thesis, University of South Carolina, 1964), 28.

contributions of his state to the southern political tradition. It is quite clear that he had by the 1930s become utterly flabbergasted at the extent to which most Americans, including southerners, had allowed South Carolina's role in southern history to nearly abscond from the nation's historical consciousness. Sass wrote Dr. Yates Snowden in 1931, "The older I get, the more of a Southerner I become, and the more of a Confederate Southerner." He attributed this attitude to his constant recognition that a much more genteel and lovely society had been destroyed by the Civil War. The Old South society would have survived, according to Sass, though doubtless in different form. This was no romanticized notion in Sass's mind, he believed his interpretation of the southern past to be realistic, or at least more so than those who did not admire the southern experience.<sup>38</sup>

Sass elaborated several additional points of purpose in writing the novel later during the year 1933. In a letter to Warrington Dawson on December 26, he wrote of his intention to write a trilogy, and *Look Back to Glory* would form a beginning. He revealed a thesis that the Great Depression was a direct result of southern defeat in war and reconstruction, that the time was ripe for southern writers to describe the virtues of the Old South and to explain their applicability to 1930s America. "I should like to tell that story and develop that thesis in two more novels which... would form a trilogy not without value, I hope, to the self-respect of our people who have been compelled too long to accept in bitter silence the philosophy of their conquerors and the stigma of error if not

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<sup>38</sup> Sass to Yates Snowden, Oct. 24, 1931, quoted in "The Contributions of Herbert Ravenel Sass to South Carolina Literature with Particular Emphasis Upon his Nature Writings" by Grace Virginia Johnson (MA Thesis, University of South Carolina, 1964), 30.

of guilt.” Sass concluded this missive by asserting fiction to be a much more effective means of communicating the virtues of the Old South than formal history.<sup>39</sup>

The string of correspondence between John Bennett and Sass during the novel’s year of publication is of particular interest. Bennett lived on the same street as Sass; it is only by their good graces and old-fashioned formalities that these letters exist. Bennett, an accomplished southern author in his own right, thought Sass’s purpose was “to essay to prove that in the social economy of the Old South shall be found our best hope for the future.” He chastised Sass rather casually however, suggesting that the novel be not so forthright and blatant in this purpose. Bennett also took issue with Sass’s portrayal of antebellum Charleston society as being agrarian. Drawing from his knowledge of Roman history, where the first use of the term agrarian was used in reference to the agrarian laws of the Gracchi in the second century, B.C., Bennett considered Sass’s use of the term quite amusing. Bennett reasoned that the Roman agrarian laws were used to confiscate and divide large patrician land-holdings for the purpose of redistribution to the plebeian order. He concluded thus, “Whatever may have been the situation in the Piedmont, or land of smaller farms, it is not to be advanced as a tenable theory that the Low Country Carolina plantation system was agrarian in any sense whatever.”<sup>40</sup> For Bennett, the historical character and lifestyle of the Carolina Lowcountry was aristocratic and patrician, not agrarian or democratic; for him, never the twain shall have met.

Sass’s response to Bennett mirrors the Vanderbilt Agrarians’ understanding of agrarianism. In *I’ll Take My Stand*, the Vanderbilt school asserted, “An agrarian society is one in which agriculture is the leading vocation, whether for wealth, for pleasure, or for

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<sup>39</sup> Sass to Warrington Dawson, 26 December 1933, Sass papers, SCHS.

<sup>40</sup> Bennett to Sass, 11 February 1933, Sass Papers, SCHS.

prestige—a form of labor that is pursued with intelligence and leisure,” they concluded that this structure “becomes the model to which the other forms approach as well as they may.”<sup>41</sup> Sass wrote to Bennett, “As to agrarianism, I was using the word in the large and somewhat loose sense in which it seems now to be generally used in contradistinction to industrialism: that is, as connoting simply a way of living based primarily on the land.”<sup>42</sup> Sass reasoned, although the term may not possess some of its original Roman meaning, the more recent and common employment was most assuredly applicable to the antebellum Carolina Lowcountry.

That Bennett would draw dissimilarities between the Roman and a southern definition of agrarianism is highly indicative of an ignorance regarding the blatant similarities between the two. Historians have occasionally noticed similarities between Italian and southern history, and an instructive comparison may also be studied between Rome’s conservatives during the republic and South Carolina’s conservative writers during the first decades of the twentieth century. Sass was very familiar with the implications of Roman culture upon South Carolina. He wrote in 1936 that the Rice Coast “was in essence an attempt to re-create in America the classic Greek ideal of democracy, the ideal which produced the great civilizations of Greece and Rome.”<sup>43</sup> In Sass’s understanding, the South Carolina lowcountry community of the antebellum period existed as the final stronghold of an antiquated Romanticism.

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<sup>41</sup> *I’ll Take My Stand*, li.

<sup>42</sup> Sass to Bennett, 12 February 1933, Sass Papers, SCHS.

<sup>43</sup> Herbert Ravenel Sass and Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties* (New York: W. Morrow and Company, 1936), 5.



In one of his letters to Bennett, Sass clarified further what he wanted to achieve through his novel. A primary intent was to call for “a return in a measure to some of the principles which the Old South exemplified.” Sass ordered these principles thus, “(1) a return to the land (2) a return to representative rather than popular government through a selective rather than a universal suffrage (3) a recognition of the fact that this enormous country of ours is a country of sections....”<sup>44</sup> Upon this final point, he elaborated his view of America as being divided into sections with different and sometimes opposing interests. Therefore the largest degree of sectional independence and state sovereignty was most suitable for the maintenance of segmented regional benefit. Sass understood these three principles as the sound foundation upon which South Carolina constructed defiance towards external authority. In many ways, his understanding reflected that of John C. Calhoun, a man who Sass revered. As Barbara Bellows has noted, “Another tragedy of the defeat of the Confederacy, in Sass’s opinion, had been the silencing of Calhoun’s voice in the modern political forum.”<sup>45</sup> Sass was indeed cognizant of the modern political scene, and remained hopeful that Calhoun’s perspective would soon witness a “process of vindication as we observe current events.”<sup>46</sup>

It comes as no surprise that Sass sent a copy of the novel to William Watts Ball, a fellow staunch southern conservative author and editor for the Charleston *News and Courier*. Ball’s review of the novel, published in the *News and Courier*, praised Sass for eloquently evincing the cardinal principles of the Confederate experience.<sup>47</sup> And it was

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<sup>44</sup> Sass to Bennett, 12 February 1933. Sass Papers, SCHS.

<sup>45</sup> Bellows, 32.

<sup>46</sup> Sass to Bennett, 12 February 1933, Sass Papers, SCHS.

Ball who in his *The State that Forgot*, a book Sass was intimately familiar with, perhaps elaborated best the second principle Sass mentioned in his letter to Bennett.<sup>48</sup> Both Sass and Ball believed the ownership of property to be the foundation of liberty; both possessed high regard and respect for South Carolina's aristocratic history. Both desired twentieth century South Carolina to consider the example of nineteenth century values.

Ball ardently advocated a position of aristocratic privilege in regards to the political body of the State; he fundamentally believed that only the particularly affluent class, which had ample time for erudite endeavors and the experience, intelligence, and forethought requisite for learned decisions, should be permitted to participate in the governance of the State. He often recollected with a high degree of nostalgia "the government of South Carolina had been notably aristocratic in form until 1868."<sup>49</sup> In regards to that earlier body politick in South Carolina history, Ball wrote in 1932 that "its essential life principle was the blending of manhood suffrage and property-holding as the basis of representation. Therein lay its health, its safety, and in strength, in form and in action it was parliamentary."<sup>50</sup> Without property, a man's ability to formulate learned decisions and sound opinions should be considered questionable. Thus 1930's South Carolina should revert back to the property qualifications for suffrage and political office which characterized the old conservative order. Sass and Ball viewed FDR and his New Deal as a threat to the restoration of this traditional and somewhat colonial social

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<sup>47</sup> Bellows, 29.

<sup>48</sup> Sass recommended Ball's book to the readers of *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> William Watts Ball, "Back to Aristocracy," in *The Editor and the Republic*, ed. Anthony Harrigan (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1954), 58.

<sup>50</sup> Ball, *The State that Forgot: South Carolina's Surrender to Democracy* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1932), 285.

categorization; they concluded that dependency on the federal government would belittle the notion of agrarian independence.

The most conspicuous criticism of *Look Back to Glory*, both in the past and presently, is that it provided a view of South Carolina's past from the planter's perspective exclusively. And a reasonable criticism it is. Sass made it very clear that he was interested in portraying the more aristocratic realm of South Carolina politics and society; this was the overwhelmingly predominant culture of the lowcountry in his mind. The New York Times reviewed Sass's novel thus, "The flaw in Mr. Sass's defense is that he has discussed neither very deeply or fully, although always engagingly, a culture only from the point of view of the chosen few." Historian Stephanie McCurry has written in a history of antebellum lowcountry yeomanry that Sass's idea of South Carolina neglected "Those lowcountry folk, descendents of slaves and crackers, for whom the past might not yet be sufficiently past...." While these are valid criticisms, it was not Sass's purpose to write the definitive history of his region. It was the planter class from whence the politicians and statesmanship of the Civil War era stemmed. These were the movers and shakers of the period Sass discussed, and were thus the figures that served his purpose of describing South Carolina philosophy of government and society. Stephanie Yuhl has suggested, "Through antebellum South Carolina culture, Sass argued against President Roosevelt's increased centralization of the American government and in favor of the supposed agrarian states' rights and the limited-democracy policies of the Old South." Sass simply chose not to include the yeomanry; this was not for him representative of the antebellum society he envisioned. Considering the nature of his argument, it was not

necessary for him to do so; the discussion by necessity revolved around the planter class.<sup>51</sup>

Sass was in fact advocating what may be termed agrarian republicanism, one of the more important notions of ante-bellum southern conservative thought. As Lacy K. Ford has suggested, this was the idea that the ownership of productive property (land) was a prerequisite for responsible citizens within a free society. It stemmed from the old “country” and landed-statesman ideology of Classical Rome and Renaissance England. A man had to achieve economic independence so as to cultivate a proper regard towards politics and repugnance towards fallacious doctrine and demagoguery. Republican man considered personal independence a necessity, for if a man was dependent on another for his livelihood or if he relied upon the benevolence of others such as factory owners or industrialists, then traditional society would question his virtue. Freedom and liberty rested upon a foundation of individual autonomy, and the best way to achieve this was for a man to live on the land, producing as many of life’s necessities as was thought practicable. This was the essence of the South’s “country-republicanism.”<sup>52</sup>

For Sass, land provided a sense of place and belonging; it instilled in man a virtuous demeanor, thus allowing for the sound reasoning and ardent political consideration that is required in a self-governing community. As John Crowe Ransom wrote, “A man can contemplate and explore, respect and love, an object as substantial as a farm or a native province,” but the factory, the millhouse, the entirety of the United States were not

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<sup>51</sup> New York Times, Nov 12 1933; Stephanie McCurry, *Master’s of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Lowcountry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 43; Stephanie E. Yuhl *A Golden Haze of Memory: The Making of Historic Charleston* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 113.

<sup>52</sup> Lacy K. Ford, *Origins of Southern Radicalism* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 50-51.

objects of compassion within the agrarian heart.<sup>53</sup> Traditionalists thought agricultural societies provided order and stability based on the rhythmic absolutes of country life, the changing of the seasons and reliance upon God and the land for sustenance tended to produce amiable and honorable traits in a person. The avariciousness of industrialized societies was anathema to the southern conservative. For a constitutional republic to work, it must be composed of virtuous citizens with independent minds who adhere to the highest attributes and advocate a perpetual probity. There had to be a sense of place and belonging, the knowledge of a responsibility to prior and succeeding generations. Such was agrarian republicanism.

Sass was part of a southern intellectual tradition. It is instructive to place him within this proper context. Whereas the 1930s South, as this thesis maintains, was the final decade of a southern culture predominantly agrarian in nature, Sass was, during this same period, one of the final serious intellectual proponents of an older southern agrarian conception. Sass's writings reflect the words of John Taylor of Caroline, Virginia who considered "agriculture as the guardian of liberty, as well as the mother of wealth."<sup>54</sup> Sass certainly could have drawn comparison between Calhoun's words from the 1830s and the economic depression of his own time, "The spirit of the times (he said) was one of dollars and cents, the spirit of speculation, which had diffused itself from the North to the South."<sup>55</sup> Sass once wrote, "Page after page of Calhoun reads today like inspired prophecy."<sup>56</sup> A wise man once said that history does not repeat itself, not exactly.

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<sup>53</sup> John Crowe Ransom, "Unreconstructed but Unregenerate," in *I'll take my Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 19-20.

<sup>54</sup> John Taylor, *Arator* (Inianapolis: LibertyClassics, 1977), 93.

Historian Michael O'Brien has asserted that the intelligentsia of the Old South "retained a revolutionary mind and, therefore, when they began to think that the United States was no longer a thing they could control, many among them did not hesitate to destroy it and make another world."<sup>57</sup> This contrasts to Sass's understanding of the southern past. Sass viewed southern conservatives, and consequently, the Confederacy, as not revolutionists intent on destroying the United States, but rather reactionaries intent on preserving John Randolph's maxim that "Change is not reform."<sup>58</sup> It was John Randolph who was able to capture the heart and spirit of southern conservatism by echoing many of the elaborations of Edmund Burke and his English conservatism. Burke was most influential on Randolph and the southern intellectual tradition. Burke's was not a unique philosophy, but it explained for Randolph a conservative reaction to hasty reform. Burke states in his *Reflections*, "People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors."<sup>59</sup> From Burke, to Taylor, to Randolph, to Calhoun, and to others not here mentioned, there existed the origins and delineation of an intellectual tradition of which Herbert Ravenel Sass became a leading literary spokesman and proponent. It is within this context of southern intellectual history that Sass's contributions must be duly accorded.

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<sup>55</sup> John C. Calhoun in the United States Senate, February 6 1837, *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, vol. 13, ed. Clyde N. Wilson (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1980), 388.

<sup>56</sup> Sass, *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, 46.

<sup>57</sup> Michael O'Brien, *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>58</sup> Russell Kirk, *John Randolph of Roanoke* (Chicago: Regnery Publishing, 1964), 181.

<sup>59</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J.G.A. Pocock (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 29.

In 1936, Sass contributed an essay to *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*. He provided a number of clues regarding his understanding of the southern past while describing what he labeled as South Carolina “Rice Coast” history. According to Sass, South Carolina during the antebellum period witnessed a flowering of the best form of democracy yet attained on the American continent. It became the epitome of an agrarian republic such as was described by W.W. Ball. Sass understood his portrayal of the past through a comfortable scene of people and the land that they worked and lived on. “It was a land which they and their fathers had made what it was and they loved it with an extraordinary and passionate devotion.”<sup>60</sup> These Carolinians were staunch individualists, determined to see to their own affairs, and utterly opposed to external authority. Traditional, devoted to agriculture, not wont to change, proponents of limited constitutional federalism: there is nothing novel about any of this of course. Sass maintained a vision of the past not unlike his traditional contemporaries, but his articulation of this past was important and of use to his purpose; he was very careful to portray this older Carolina society as primarily agrarian, with the purpose of contributing to the 1930s Agrarian debate.

As sort of a slap in the face of southerners who had become employed by industry or who had sought industrial entrepreneurship, Sass averred that the old Carolina society was “an agricultural society and therefore no irresistible industrial revolution forced upon them keen personal rivalry and professional competition as the price of success.” It was for this reason, according to Sass, that agriculture and statesmanship became the two primary vocations of Carolina men. This older society represented something lasting and

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<sup>60</sup> Sass, *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, 10.

worthwhile, “a way of thought as well as a way of life” which placed South Carolina in a position of leadership and authority during the last three decades immediately preceding the Civil War.<sup>61</sup> Sass told the story of an Iowa farmer who in 1850 visited Jehossie, the plantation of William Aiken. He told how the farmer was impressed by the degree of self-sufficiency and orderly operation located on this plantation, and how such a plantation would have been transformed from idle wilderness into immensely productive property during the course of a few generations. With the aftermath of war and reconstruction, Sass concluded, “Jehossie has gone back to wilderness.”<sup>62</sup> Such a statement can only come from a man who viewed Confederate defeat as the central historical event in the experience of the southern people.

Sass was concerned that the form of democracy, or better termed agrarian republic, developed by the Old South had since the end of the Civil War been forgotten or at least grossly misunderstood. He was deeply disquieted that this idea was during his time being labeled romantic and not realistic. Sass often used this term realistic to describe this older society. His view was that, although a tragedy in his mind, the greatest fallacy of the mid-nineteenth century could not be that the South was perceived as defending slavery rather than self-government. “Of even greater consequence,” Sass wrote, “was the fact that a last attempt to bring the noble ideal of democracy into accord with fundamental realities had failed....”<sup>63</sup> The system of government that supplanted that native to the South, which Sass believed others had erroneously perceived as superior and of enormous

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<sup>61</sup> Sass, *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, 12.

<sup>62</sup> Sass, *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, 33.

<sup>63</sup> Sass, *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, 50.



success, was not directed by reality. The reality for Sass as a southern conservative was that all societies in history have been composed of capable and incapable people, the veracious and the mendacious, and any notion of universal democracy can do no less than irrevocably injure liberty. Human inequality was an immutable fact for him. This new form of American democracy, with its unstable foundation of egalitarianism and consolidation, had overshadowed what Sass called “the Carolina experiment” and the political order of the Old South.<sup>64</sup>

Sass recognized, even during the 1930s, that such an understanding of government would be equated with Fascism. Robert Brinkmeyer has recently argued in his book *The Fourth Ghost*, a study of white southern writers from 1930-1950, that “white southern writers during these two decades were actually turned fearfully outward, haunted by the ghostly presence of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.”<sup>65</sup> Brinkmeyer concluded, “for at least two decades a large number of white southern writers were haunted by Fascism’s long shadow over the South and that this haunting fundamentally shaped their imaginations, work, and careers.”<sup>66</sup> Sass, however, cannot be viewed as one of “a large number” of southern literary artists during this period. If we are to consider Sass’s understanding of this comparison between the South and Fascist Europe, then Brinkmeyer’s argument is nothing new. In *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, Sass addressed this issue straightforwardly. He understood that the southern vision of democracy (or agrarian republicanism), and most particularly South Carolina’s

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<sup>64</sup> Sass, *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, 49.

<sup>65</sup> Robert H. Brinkmeyer, *The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930-1950* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), 2.

<sup>66</sup> Brinkmeyer, 23.

contributions to its preservation, would be fallaciously asserted to be akin to twentieth century European Fascism. Sass averred that Fascism required a dictator and a complete and thorough destruction of individualism. According to Sass, the South never had a dictator, having concerned itself that Jefferson Davis might usurp even his powers during the South's bright and shining Confederate moments. To Sass there was no place more individualistic than the South. He observed that Fascist submergence of individuals within the State could not be equated with southern devotion to individual States.<sup>67</sup>

Nazism was the result of a repudiation of the philosophy, science, art, literature, politics, and institutions of western civilization. The South was opposed to this; southern conservative writers, such as Sass, essayed to explain the unadulterated conservative nature of southern culture within western civilization. For Sass, it was wide of the mark to draw similarities between the South and Fascists regimes.

There were other South Carolinians whose works do not support the Brinkmeyer thesis. In 1913, the father of Alice Ravenel Huger Smith, D.E. Huger Smith, wrote *A Charlestonian's Recollections*. In 1950, it was published in Charleston with an insightful introduction written by Harold A. Mouzon. In a sentence that very well could have been written about Sass, Mouzon asserted, "Mr. Smith is thoroughly unreconstructed and I see no reason why he should have been reconstructed. He was pretty soundly constructed to begin with." Mr. Smith, according to Mouzon, held views leaning towards restricted democracy and human inequality, and believed in the sort of adherence to limited constitutional federalism and agrarian community that existed in South Carolina prior to Confederate defeat. In 1950, Mouzon thought "liberals" unhesitant and willing to dismiss

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<sup>67</sup> Sass, *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, 51.

Mr. Smith's perspective, which was not in many ways dissimilar to that of Sass, as narrow and old-fashioned, and entitled to no respect. He concluded, "For the mark of your true liberal seems too often to be a blind intolerance of any differing opinion and a tendency to dispose of it by labeling it as fascist." It is difficult to support Brinkmeyer's argument by reading South Carolina literature written between 1930 and 1950. It was argument people such as Sass and Mouzon witnessed during their own time, attributed to the new American system, and sought to boldly defend against.

Eugene Genovese has observed, "...every southern conservative of note has recoiled from the tenets that became fundamental to fascism." Genovese conceded that the southern conservative might applaud Mussolini's adherence to a hierarchical society, and perhaps even his call for its conservation as a necessity. But they would certainly object to his idea of the state serving as the arbiter of ethics. Genovese recognized the identification of southern racism with European Fascism as dangerously deceptive. He noticed a racist proclivity in Fascist Italy, but suggested this was nothing similar to Hitler's "overtly racist ideology and practice." To Genovese, to capitalize upon ill-conceived similarities between the South and fascism is "patently absurd." These were Sass's sentiments precisely.<sup>68</sup>

Richard Weaver in 1944 pondered this same issue, stating, "That the South was the first section of the United States to sense an enemy in fascism." He averred that at first glance similarities seemed logical. After all, southern whites considered themselves superior in relation to blacks, they relished family and soil ties, and they despised generally an urban centered economy. A return to feudal ideas might then appear a

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<sup>68</sup> Eugene Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievements and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 88-89.

revised Confederate dream. Weaver then asked a question, what explained the hostility of the South towards fascism? He began to answer the question with discussion of the French Revolution. The traditional South, “which has never entered the French Revolution, cannot understand the forces which are driving these nations to leave it.” Therefore the South, as the most conservative portion of the union, opposed the destruction of religion and the creation of a mass state. To Weaver, fascism represented a movement much worse than the French Revolution, “The South perceived intuitively that the new radicalisms of Europe represent a final assault upon society as that term has been understood in Western civilization.” According to Weaver, the centralizing tendencies and regimented suppression of individualism, characteristic of fascism, were the very things against which the South fought the Civil War.<sup>69</sup>

Sass thought the origins of the new American system were to be found in the North. He did not view the Carolina experiment as a failure by motive, but rather by a fatal collision with the northern conception of American identity and nationalism. There existed an entirely separate version of America that had witnessed defeat in battle, although not in principle. The origins of this were obviously to be found in the South, but more importantly for Sass, this “way of thought,” as he liked to call the southern philosophy, originated in classic Greek ideals that were recreated by South Carolina for application in America. Nonetheless, according to Sass, the southern idea had since the war suffered “a long period during which its merits and lessons have been lost to sight.”<sup>70</sup> As an intellectual progeny of the Old Order, Sass understood no romanticized Lost Cause

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<sup>69</sup> Richard M. Weaver, *The Southern Essays of Richard Weaver*, edited by George M. Curtis and James J. Thompson (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1987), 183-188.

<sup>70</sup> Weaver, *Southern Essays*, 47.

movement. He conceded that the world of the great plantations was gone, but the “cause” of self-determination of limited government was yet viable in his mind, “Those who see it [the Rice Coast] only as a lovely but faded romanticism and perceive no reason except a sentimental one for looking back are blind to its true nature and meaning.”<sup>71</sup> From this perspective, the southern conception of republicanism existed not as a futile theory defeated once by superior northern force, but rather as an enlargement of actual experience within the classical tradition. For Sass, the southern story of realistic democracy and South Carolina’s centrality to it was of contemporary significance; it cannot suggest the loss of principle. It was for this purpose that he wrote to inform the direction of his state.

During his time, Sass considered this idea of a separate southern conception of America as “a vitally important fact which nearly all historians have ignored completely....”<sup>72</sup> Recent scholarship, significantly so, has treated this fact more seriously, having noticed a similar lacuna within the historiography to that Sass suggested in the 1930s. In 1990, Richard Benseel produced a political/economic history, *Yankee Leviathan*. Benseel’s claim was that the decade of the Civil War, wherein the Republican Party first conquered and then attempted reconstruction of the southern economy, was successful for the North because of a northern-based nationalism that asserted the right of the victorious North to control the new definition of the American state.<sup>73</sup> Benseel noted, and significantly so, that northern victory destroyed southern resistance to central authority

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<sup>71</sup> Sass, *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, 55.

<sup>72</sup> Sass, *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties*, 49.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Franklin Benseel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), x.

and thus created a nation-state, although a full third of this new geographical and political state had lost its independent capacity to maintain distinctive social and political traditions. Bensel asserted forthrightly that from 1861 to 1877, the Republicans and the nation-state were one and the same. The Republicans gained power at the same time that the plantation aristocracy was no longer represented in the Congress, and the federal government therefore became the ways and means of the Republicans in their quest for northern dominance of the entire American union. According to Bensel, they waged war against the South for this purpose, this northern predominance.<sup>74</sup>

Susan Grant has noted, “For many northerners, what they meant by nationalism was northern sectionalism writ large. When they spoke of a solidarity in the nation, they envisioned it in northern terms.”<sup>75</sup> From this perspective, it was the object of the northern mind prior to and during the war to rid America’s future from the influence of a powerful, cohesive southern identity. James Cobb asserted that the idea of a “North” has never been as important historically to that section as the idea of the South has been to the former States of the Confederacy. He continued, “Southerners have staked their claim to a distinctive regional identity defined in contrast with the North, northerners have been more likely to characterize their own identity as simply American and define that in contrast with the South.”<sup>76</sup> What Peter Parish has recognized, and Grant mentioned this as well, is that the southern variant of American nationalism no longer exists; it was

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<sup>74</sup> Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan*, 3-6.

<sup>75</sup> Susan-Mary Grant, *North over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 158.

<sup>76</sup> James C. Cobb, *Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7.

defeated militarily in 1865 and witnessed a near total demise after the Lost Cause movement of the late nineteenth century. What happened, according to both authors, is that the North and the Republican Party were able to transform the entire structure of the American federal system and reshape the American image, by design.<sup>77</sup>

The theme of southern separatism as it existed after the war, and the question as to what degree it accepted the new American national identity, is a central issue and theme Sass addressed in his writings. He was of the belief that “we took the wrong turn in 1861-1865 when a civilization, more realistic, sounder and saner than the one that supplanted it, was destroyed.”<sup>78</sup> If nothing else is clear, that Sass had not accepted a nationalized American identity is blatantly so. Moreover, the extent to which the South was willing to accept this suggests the degree to which northern nationalism succeeded in molding the southern image after the war. Sass was in hopes that it would not. His writings were pragmatic; his was a program of ideology devoted to the preservation of a southern tradition and identity in conflict with that of northern created Americanism. Historian scholarship has attempted to understand the displacement of the southern conception that Sass envisioned and understood very clearly. Such action suggests that the memory and thought of Herbert Ravenel Sass warrants due consideration.

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<sup>77</sup> Peter Parish, *The North and the Nation in the Era of the Civil War* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), 144. Grant, *North over South*, 18.

<sup>78</sup> David Aiken, *Fire in the Cradle: Charleston's Literary Heritage* (Charleston, SC: Charleston Press, 1999), 144.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A MEMORY OF THOSE DAYS: ARCHIBALD RUTLEDGE

Mrs. Elizabeth Daniel of Indiantown, South Carolina, 97 years of age, remembers many changes brought to the South during the time period in question. Mrs. Daniel was born 1912 in Lexington, South Carolina and earned a degree in English from the University of South Carolina during the 1930s. Her education had brought her to a small farming community in Williamsburg County, an area then in dire need of additional teachers. Having spent her formative years on a farm next to the Saluda River in the Carolina midlands, her first impressions of lowcountry farm-life were not great. It was, however, the kindheartedness and hospitality of the local people that thrust Mrs. Daniel into accepting a teaching position at the Indiantown School. She was impressed with the high degree of generosity and mannerisms of the local community. Indiantown is located approximately forty miles from Hampton Plantation, the home of Archibald Rutledge. Mrs. Daniel befriended the man she referred to as “Dr. Rutledge” during her early years at Indiantown and would occasionally visit Hampton Plantation with her students.

Their friendship had by the 1960s grown into a lasting relationship beneficial to them both. Rutledge composed a poem for Mrs. Daniel that at first glance appears rather amorous in nature. But Mrs. Daniel, who was happily married to a prominent farmer and landowner, accepted the note with the proper understanding that Rutledge’s pleasantries occasionally assumed a character of excessive flattery. Rutledge wrote, “How little of earth’s loveliness I knew till, Beautiful Spirit, I discovered you!” During an interview,



Mrs. Daniel expressed her great admiration for Rutledge. To her, he was not simply a gentleman, but the quintessential exemplar of southern manhood. She said that during her visits with her students to Hampton, Rutledge repeatedly treated each person as if they were the most important of God's creation. He would often tell stories of South Carolina history, his family's contributions to this past, and his personal memories of life on Hampton during the turn of the century. He was close to nature and his land, and identified his life with that of previous generations. For Mrs. Daniel, Rutledge represented the finest display of the southern gentleman ideal, an ideal that was at the center of Rutledge's conception of southern civilization.<sup>79</sup>

Archibald Rutledge was born 23 October 1883 to Margaret Seabrook Rutledge and Henry Middleton Rutledge II. His father, commonly referred to as the Colonel, was the youngest soldier of that rank in the Army of Northern Virginia. Archibald's great-great-grandfather was John Rutledge, first governor of South Carolina after the state's secession from the British Empire. John's younger brother Edward was at twenty-five the youngest signer of the Declaration of Independence. Archibald attended the Porter Military Academy in Charleston and later earned a degree from Union College in New York. In 1904, he accepted a position as English instructor at Mercersburg Academy in Pennsylvania and remained there until his retirement in 1937 as Chair of the English Department. As a result of his father's death in 1923, Archibald became the absentee owner of his ancestral home place, Hampton Plantation along the Santee River in South

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<sup>79</sup> Interview with the author, September 22, 2009.

Carolina's historic rice growing region. After retirement, Archibald, Poet Laureate of South Carolina, returned to Hampton where he lived until his death in 1973.<sup>80</sup>

Between 1910 and 1940, Rutledge wrote on topics ranging from hunting stories to religious poems, to southern history and essays on natural life. Compared to Herbert Ravenel Sass, Rutledge's writings rarely if ever appeared political. However, much like Sass, Rutledge's admiration for natural beauty and love of the land molded his writings about the South. Rutledge first sold short stories and contributed nature essays and poems to national publications. His peculiar ability to write simplistically on a wide range of issues garnered him a national reputation as a southern, regional author. Rutledge strayed from complicating the obvious; he possessed a knack for articulating characteristics of the South in a way that others could understand and relate to. Of the three Carolina authors here considered, Rutledge was by far the best known and widely-read.

Rutledge's writings on the South were in many ways a product of his life on Hampton Plantation and the understanding of the southern past he learned from his experiences there with friends and family. To value what his writings reveal about southern history and identity, one must first know of Hampton. In 1953, Frank S. Mead described the plantation's impact upon Rutledge, "Hampton had given of her strength and spirit to the making of a man; here, on land that has been in his family since 1686, lives Archibald Rutledge, poet and author of books that are mirrors for beauty, lover of man and nature, master of Hampton now." The house was built in 1730 by Daniel Horry and was constructed of black cypress, mahogany, and all-heart yellow pine. The eight pillars along the front entrance of the mansion were solid pieces of pine, and the porch itself was

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<sup>80</sup> Archibald Rutledge, *Beauty in the Heart, including Meet Archibald Rutledge by Frank S. Mead* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1953).

made of single piece forty-two foot long boards. Before the Civil War, it was a fully operating rice plantation and subsistence farm. During Archibald's early life, it remained capable of producing many of the family's livelihood and food needs. George Washington visited the house during his 1790 tour of the South. Francis Marion slept there during the Revolution and was nearly captured unawares in slumber by Banastre Tarleton. Nineteenth century visitors to the plantation included Daniel Webster, Edgar Allan Poe, and Robert E. Lee. As Mead wrote, "All of them lent their dignity to Hampton; all of them are part of the heritage of Archibald Rutledge, and a fine part of him...."<sup>81</sup> Hampton, as an identifiable place, as a tangible ancestral landed estate, became for Rutledge the well-spring from which his understanding of the South originated. Unlike Sass, as well as many of the Vanderbilt Agrarians, Rutledge based his writings upon an actual plantation experience with the old regime.

In 1937, Rutledge wrote *My Colonel and His Lady*. This was primarily a work describing the character of Rutledge's parents who lived through the Civil War era. The New York Times reviewed it as "a beautiful, interesting and valuable picture for our national memories."<sup>82</sup> Colonel Henry Middleton Rutledge commanded a unit of North Carolinians in the Army of Northern Virginia. He became colonel at the age of twenty-one, and like Archibald, was born and raised on Hampton. Rutledge described his father, whom he called Colonel, as fully six feet tall with one shoulder that drooped because of two wounds, one from Sharpsburg and the other from the engagement at Malvern Hill. Rutledge wrote of his Colonel, "I take it that he stood for much that was best in the Old South." Rutledge made clear his purpose for writing this account. He wrote of his

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<sup>81</sup> Meade, 9-11.

<sup>82</sup> New York Times, April 18 1937.

displeasure with those who easily forget that which is charming and memorable within human beings, “I don’t ever want my Colonel to be hidden in those shades.” To convince his readers to develop knowledge and appreciation of what was best in the Old South was his primary purpose in writing of his father. He assumed the appearance of an English sportsman, “that the cast of his countenance was gentle, yet with nobility and pride of honor softly suffusing it, all these matters are in a way descriptive.” For Rutledge, it was through the Colonel’s behavior that he came to know the real character of his father, “I have seen him dismiss a great subject with a bare wave of his hand, and slay an imposter with the tilt of an eyebrow.”<sup>83</sup>

Rutledge was sufficiently concerned with the condition of the South during the 1930s. He noticed the period of transition, and wrote of his Colonel in reaction to it. Rutledge wrote, “There are a lot of people who live in the South who somehow are not southern.” He expressed discomfiture at his inability to understand exactly why this was the case and wondered if this was because southerners became to lack background. Characterizing these misplaced or confused southerners as gruff, strident, and materialistic, Rutledge believed these people represented something different, something not of the Old South, “which produced the noblest civilization that has yet appeared on this continent.” That the modern progress of the South was valiant Rutledge granted, but he was at a loss to understand why many of his contemporaries were so highly interested in progress and motivated by it. “No material greatness can ever satisfy the heart, which will keep on yearning after romance. It cannot live by bread alone.”<sup>84</sup> The South, for Rutledge, had a

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<sup>83</sup> Archibald Rutledge, *My Colonel and His Lady* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1937), 10-11.

<sup>84</sup> Rutledge, *My Colonel and His Lady*, 47.

fully developed civilization before the materialistic tendencies of the twentieth century became influential.

The Colonel was a survivor of the older Carolina community. “He was the past, miraculously preserved.” To Rutledge, the southern past is composed not only of “history, tradition, custom, and precedent, but ways of life and of thought and even of motives dictating behavior.” The reader was told the story of how Rutledge would often find his Colonel sitting quietly in the garden at Hampton, enjoying the sounds and scenes of the plantation’s natural beauty. The time would be around eleven in the morning, “when most other men were shrewdly and strenuously engaged in the business of piling dollar upon dollar.” The Colonel would call for his son to sit and talk awhile, thus providing ample opportunity for the southern veteran to delineate his philosophy on life. Rutledge wrote that his Colonel knew full well that many younger southerners thought him lazy for not toiling incessantly during the daylight hours. The Colonel tells Archibald that too much work for material gain is a waste of time, “Hurry shows a lack of poise.” The Colonel is quoted as saying “I’m not persuaded that those who labor incessantly at anything have chosen the better part. I hate to be cumbered with business.”<sup>85</sup> For the Colonel, and consequently for Rutledge, the modern notion of progress meant little for the traditional South and contributed only so much to its character or culture.

Rutledge provided his own thoughts upon his Colonel’s philosophy, a philosophy he considered an informative reflection of the Old South with beneficial lessons for his interwar contemporaries. “I mused on his way of life: here was a sweet, gentle, unstrenuous, finished sort of living. There was no desire to ‘get ahead.’ There was no

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<sup>85</sup>Rutledge, *My Colonel and His Lady*, 48-49.

avarice of wealth or power of fame.” The Colonel, the 1937 reader realized, did not strive to succeed, but rather to become a success. For Rutledge, his Colonel had known how to enjoy life with great satisfaction. Speaking directly to those southerners who were somehow insufficiently southern, Rutledge averred, “This philosophy precludes the glittering supposition that success means the achievement of some great material goal.” The Colonel had contented himself with enjoying the simple pleasures of flowers and trees, friends and family, and a profound memory of those who had passed away. According to Rutledge, his Colonel’s way of life was a product of the South, its land and history.<sup>86</sup> Whereas the Old South had long ceased to exist, it was the character of that older civilization that Rutledge sought to maintain in his own life. What remained of that character during the 1930s came to exist in opposition to burgeoning and abstract conceptions of wealth and progress.

Rutledge considered the prior existence of a Southern Confederacy as the central, defining event of his father’s life. To Rutledge, “The Colonel was wholly genuine. His title he had come by through four years of battle strife. With very little persuasion he would tell you about the war, and of course there was but one war to him.”<sup>87</sup> To the Colonel, Gettysburg was the greatest disaster in all of history. The Colonel had background. He made the acquaintance of Generals Lee and Jackson and often considered the character of Lee as a famous example of southern chivalry to be the best thing to come of the war. It was the Colonel’s memory of the Confederacy that became his son’s memory as well. He wrote, “The memory of him gives life for me, and I believe

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<sup>86</sup> Rutledge, *My Colonel and His Lady*, 53.

<sup>87</sup> Rutledge, *My Colonel and His Lady*, 85.

for many others, an aspect of nobility and grace.”<sup>88</sup> For Rutledge, his father was a living embodiment of all that was good in the older South. Rutledge’s recollection of his father shaped his memory of the Old South and contributed mightily to his interpretation of the Confederacy and its meaning.

The idea of the southern country gentleman is for the southern conservative tradition the quintessential character of republican quality. Mark Malvasi perhaps said it best, “The old southern gentleman yielded to his tradition and to his God.”<sup>89</sup> This gentleman was more a descendent of the middle-class of the old world than a transplanted member of a landed aristocracy. However, by his fortitude, strength, intelligence, and perseverance, he grew to wealth and established for him and his family a good name, which was, according to Mel Bradford, the Old South’s highest motive.<sup>90</sup> This gentleman became the leader of a patriarchal family unit, and the political representative of an agrarian constituency; this honor was given him due to his accomplishments in producing wealth and prosperity for his family. The family was a member of the larger community. Also, this gentleman viewed his position in the world in relation to a much older western and English history and tradition. Rutledge wrote of his father, “England was always the ancient home.”<sup>91</sup> Rather than thinking of himself as an aimless wanderer, this country gentleman knew that he was descended from actual people and actual circumstances, and considered his responsibilities to his family and political state as part of that heritage.

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<sup>88</sup> Rutledge, *My Colonel and His Lady*, 113.

<sup>89</sup> Mark Malvasi, *The Unregenerate South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 222.

<sup>90</sup> M.E. Bradford, *A Better Guide than Reason* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 179.

<sup>91</sup> Rutledge, *My Colonel and His Lady*, 43.

The traditional South's sense of place and personal identity within a physical location served as a catalyst for southern conservatives in understanding the meaning of the southern past. This was also a basic principle of southern agrarianism. The southerner cannot understand the world outside of his own experiences within a particular time and place. Andrew Lytle, one of the original Vanderbilt Agrarians, wrote of this in detail. Lytle believed that the southern man "must have location, which means property, which means the family and the communion of families which is the state."<sup>92</sup> It was therefore the family that grounded the southerner to a piece of land, or to a state. Lytle provided this sort of aesthetic appeal to the idea of place, location, and continuity, a theme already familiar to those who study the South. Mel Bradford, on the other hand, explained location in more practical political and historical terms that explain southern identity from the conservative perspective. He wrote, "The free planter learned to trust himself, to be, by his location in Virginia or Carolina, something more than an Englishman, though only incidentally and unselfconsciously so, out of his whole Englishness."<sup>93</sup> Through this understanding of the South's location in the world, southern identity was first founded upon an individual familiarity with England, identification with the norms and culture of that society. The southerner was therefore English, but more than that, he was a Virginian, or a South Carolinian; a member of the older tradition in the form of relocation to the American continent. The writings of Archibald Rutledge suggest he too thought this a precise interpretation.

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<sup>92</sup> Andrew Lytle, *From Eden to Babylon: The Social and Political Essays of Andrew Nelson Lytle*, ed. M.E. Bradford (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1990), 156.

<sup>93</sup> Bradford, *Better Guide than Reason*, 179.



In *Home by the River*, Rutledge wrote of English influence upon South Carolina culture. By reviewing the reading matter of the Hampton library, Rutledge concluded that Carolina culture was from the earliest influenced by English values and customs. In the Hampton library Rutledge located nearly everything worth reading printed in English since the time of Milton. He wrote, "I get the impression that the early colonists of a certain station had in England standing orders for anything significant in a literary way." Rutledge also noted that all four signers of the Declaration from South Carolina had been educated in England. He was of the opinion that antebellum life in Charleston was similar to other communities in England. For Rutledge, the furniture, clothing, and music of the Carolina lowcountry originated in English culture. Even the typical lowcountry way of deer hunting with hounds was "after the English fashion." Carolinians were like English Cavaliers "in their sensitiveness to beauty, to the appeals of chivalry and the nobler instincts, to an unwritten code of honor...."<sup>94</sup>

Rutledge revered his mother in much the same way as he did the Colonel. Professor Susan Donaldson has suggested that southern agrarianism was dependent upon "the invisibility and subordination of African-Americans and upon the marginalization and silence of white women."<sup>95</sup> Rutledge's writings expressed his admiration for both groups, and thus contradict Professor Donaldson's assertion. Rutledge wrote of his mother as "characteristic of a great time and a great people." He also wrote, "One of the truly mastering memories of my life, a memory of power sufficient to determine destiny, is that of my mother." Rutledge provided an image of his mother, Margaret Hamilton

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<sup>94</sup> Archibald Rutledge, *Home by the River* (Orangeburg, SC: Sandlapper Publishing, 1974), 27-36.

<sup>95</sup> Susan V. Donaldson, introduction to *I'll Take My Stand* by Twelve Southerners, Library of Southern Civilization (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 75 Anniversary Edition, 2006), xviii.

Seabrook Rutledge, as an Old South lady incapable of unkind behavior. Her mannerisms and decorum proved instrumental in the construction of her son's character. She instilled in him a sense of religion and love of God and His Creation. The reader is shown a southern lady of the highest caliber in the estimation of her many acquaintances. By no means did Rutledge attempt to marginalize or silence the accomplishments of his mother's life. He praised it, "It may be that civilizations have gone with the wind; but out of the past comes back to me, ever with fresh radiance, the soul of my mother. She gave me life, and in that life she had unfaltering faith."<sup>96</sup> Rutledge, at least, illustrated the high role ladies possessed in the southern agrarian mind.

One major criticism of the Vanderbilt Agrarians was their lack of discussion regarding southern blacks. Interestingly, a chief theme throughout Rutledge's writings of this period is the character of southern blacks, as he knew them. This presents a significant difference in approach to an articulation of a southern image and tradition. Whereas the Vanderbilt school mentioned little of blacks and their contributions to the agrarian South, this was a matter of great importance to many writers of the Carolina school. Rutledge in particular praised black persons' contributions to southern culture and credited them with shaping much of his southern conception. In 1947, Rutledge completed *God's Children*, a detailed account of the blacks of Hampton and his relationships with them during his lifetime and most particularly since his return to South Carolina in 1937. Rutledge's writings of his black acquaintances contain not the slightest hint of superiority on his part. Nowhere in his writings did he consider his position as the owner of Hampton in any way superior to that of the blacks who lived there as well. In striking contrast to the

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<sup>96</sup> Rutledge, *My Colonel and His Lady*, 117-119, 188.

agrarian manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*, Rutledge's type of Carolina agrarianism described a culture created by the accomplishments of both the white and black communities. On Hampton, Rutledge witnessed a single community of whites and blacks in many ways similar to his memory of the older South.

The opening sentences of *God's Children* state, "My father bequeathed to me many friends. Nor could there be a richer heritage than this." Blacks, from this perspective, were a significant part of Rutledge's legacy. They were friends rather than slaves. Rutledge wrote, "They know, it seems to me, everything about life and about human character."<sup>97</sup> Rutledge described the blacks of Hampton as living representatives of the old days. In fact, many of them remembered the period prior to and during the advent of the Confederacy. Of course, one cannot generalize about the South or even South Carolina from the perspective of a single figure, but that does not detract from its importance in meaning. To Rutledge, he and his father were merely employers of an immensely talented group of working individuals. The many black talents described for the reader included woodworking, gardening, architectural prowess, and a plethora of crafting abilities. Rutledge asserted, "Any race that can produce such workmen is a race that merits our respect and instinctively has our admiration." Time and again, Rutledge elaborated upon his respect and admiration of his black friends, and not once did he belittle their abilities because of any lack of formal education. Rutledge admired the ability of blacks to perform many duties for themselves such as constructing a piece of furniture, training a mule for the field, and providing food by growing things and hunting game. Southern blacks of the 1930s and 40s still understood a sense of accomplishment,

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<sup>97</sup>Archibald Rutledge, *God's Children* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2009), 7-8.

of a job well done, the meaning of a good day's work in the fields, and the simple joy derived from killing a deer or rabbit. They seemed to Rutledge the largest body of southerners who still understood and enjoyed an older, simpler agrarian way of life.<sup>98</sup>

Black persons, then, coupled with an articulation of the southern past, served for Rutledge as a hopeful set of examples for southerners to learn from. In his words, "For all our so-called advance, the people of the past, for most essential matters, knew more about life than we do." The black community of Hampton was of this past, Rutledge wrote of them as being "living links with the distant past."<sup>99</sup> The Colonel was too. Rutledge told the story of how the plantation workers would approach him on any given day, talking about the Colonel and identifying his life "with a happier day than ours." He continued, "Insofar as human relationships are concerned, there is no substitute for affection, for where true affection is, no thoughts of *rights* or of *equality* ever arises."<sup>100</sup> Although Rutledge himself attended college in the north and taught English in Pennsylvania for several decades, on Hampton during and immediately after 1937 "things are somewhat as they have always been." The Colonel died in 1922, but the people he left behind in and around Hampton continued the farming and tending of the land. Upon his return to Hampton, Rutledge noticed with much delight that the black people were "uncontaminated by civilization in its grosser material aspects." For Rutledge, black

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<sup>98</sup> Rutledge, *God's Children*, 15-17.

<sup>99</sup>Rutledge, *Home by the river*, 158.

<sup>100</sup>Rutledge, *God's Children*, 24.

people knew much about the Colonel's southern philosophy of life that many others seemed to have forgotten.<sup>101</sup>

Rutledge sought to inform his reader about the black man's contributions to the southern past. "I am glad to honor him for the part he had played in the history of our country." It was the black man who plowed the fields, cut the wood, dug canals, constructed dike systems, and raised farm animals. The southern way of life that Rutledge knew was the creation of both whites and blacks alike. Regarding the black man, "He has not only toiled for us, but by his music, his mirth, his fealty, and his philosophic acceptance of life and of death, he has spiritually enriched us. All these things represent a vast debt, unpayable, of the white man to the black."<sup>102</sup> To illustrate this point, Rutledge made great mention of his own debt to the blacks of Hampton.

Rutledge wrote time after time about black influences upon his spiritual life. He wrote that he had grown tired of the pomp of modern Christians. He expressed disdain towards those who think of God only when they can worship in large, ostentatious cathedrals. To him, the Christian humility of the Colonel's generation and of his own childhood was being replaced by a self-centered conception of Christianity based upon what God could offer the Christian, rather than the other way around. Rutledge also wrote that his appreciation of religion had turned to the blacks, "I am turning to the plantation Negroes I have loved and cherished since childhood. In some unmistakably genuine essentials, if they are not close to Christ, no one in the world is any more."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Rutledge, *God's Children*, 7, 79.

<sup>102</sup> Rutledge, *God's Children*, 72-73.

<sup>103</sup> Rutledge, *God's Children*, 77.

As a side note, the southern country gentleman ideal as represented in all the sources for this project took for granted the primacy of Christian religion. This humble Christian, according to Rutledge, was a product of an agrarian lifestyle. Rutledge wrote, “To me it has always appeared that a simple faith is far more natural to people rurally environed than to those amid the artificial palaces of civilization.” People who live in the country “never find it hard to sense the nearness and the power and the love of God.” But those of the city “are less free to feel God with them.”<sup>104</sup> In many ways, Rutledge was echoing the sentiments of Thomas Jefferson’s well known quote; “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.”<sup>105</sup> In the eyes of Rutledge, both black and white South Carolinians contributed to the state’s southern identity. He entertained little notion that the culture and history of the lowcountry had been an exclusive product of white accomplishments. In reference to “God’s Children,” Rutledge viewed Hampton, “Not as mine, but ours.”<sup>106</sup>

Rutledge wrote in 1941, “Let all those who speak of race questions be reminded that there are none. But there is always a human question, a heart question.”<sup>107</sup> After his return to South Carolina in 1937, Rutledge repeatedly expressed his love and admiration for the blacks he knew. This introduces the larger point; his construction of southern identity was completely at odds with the way most South Carolinians of the 1930s and

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<sup>104</sup> Rutledge, *God’s Children*, 80.

<sup>105</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States Inc., 1984), 290.

<sup>106</sup> Rutledge, *God’s Children*, 29.

<sup>107</sup> Rutledge, *Home by the River*, 125.

40s viewed their society. The older agrarian conservatism of the state had been largely replaced by a vicious racial ideology. The racist, vulgar, and populist politics of leaders such as Ben Tillman, Cole Blease, and Ellison Durant Smith had created in South Carolina a pernicious conglomeration of mill and town workers as well as poor, ill-educated farmers who were more concerned with preserving white supremacy than any memory of a Confederate/ Old South ideal of genteel agrarianism. Principally originating in the old Confederate regime's inability to maintain its power over the masses after the Civil War, the state had literally become a bastion of racial conflict. Rutledge was indeed a member of a declining faction, an advocate of his father's generation, one of the last of a dying breed.

The story of Wade Hampton III reveals much about the character and motivations of South Carolina's planter class, and its inability to stem the tide of change during the post-bellum era. Historian Robert K. Ackerman maintains that Hampton was representative of a waning conservative regime that experienced a precipitous decline of influence among South Carolinians of the late nineteenth century. Ackerman suggests that in spite of Hampton's success as a Confederate general and South Carolina governor, his failed political intentions affected the state for several generations. Focusing more upon the general's post-war career as a staunch champion of the *antebellum status quo*, his treatment relates the story of the decline and fall of South Carolina's traditional ruling aristocracy through the eyes and ears of one of its most accomplished defenders. It was never the objective of Wade Hampton or Archibald Rutledge to understand New South ideology. Such an ideology witnessed its greatest embodiment with the rise of Tillmanism at the expense of the Bourbon regime. Ackerman concludes his work with the

story of Ben Tillman's rise at and the decline of the older conservatives. He views Tillman as the instigator and harbinger of the vulgar, cutthroat politics that suffused South Carolina well into the twentieth century. Whereas scholarly mention of twentieth century South Carolinians such as Ellison Durant Smith or Strom Thurmond often suggest that they were the last members of the Old South mentality, Ackerman's work leaves the impression that it really ceased to exist much earlier with the state's repudiation of Hampton.<sup>108</sup>

Francis Butler Simkins wrote in his 1944 biography of Tillman that no South Carolinian save Calhoun had ever made such a profound impression upon his generation. Tillmanism, in its most virulent form, capitalized upon violence to reach whatever goals deemed necessary or beneficial for whites. It prevented dissent within the state's white population, largely through violence. There existed no effective opposition political party, and this remained the case when Simkins wrote his history, "Ben Tillman openly justified violence when necessary to enforce the majority sentiment of South Carolina whites. Such an attitude imposed, and still imposes, a dreadful tyranny upon the state." Simkins continued his discussion with the affects upon the state's blacks, the primary object of Tillmanism type violence. The 1895 state constitution, which was mostly a product of Tillman's own design, had destroyed all political privileges and civil rights of South Carolina blacks, and had created an insurmountable caste system. According to Simkins, "Tillman endorsed this tyranny to the end of his days."<sup>109</sup> Although Simkins recognized Tillman as the man who single-handedly introduced an era of much racial

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<sup>108</sup> Robert K. Ackerman, *Wade Hampton III* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>109</sup> Francis Butler Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman, with a new introduction by Orville Vernon Burton* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 551-552.



oppression, he remained an admirer of Tillman, calling him a true southern gentleman and great exemplar of the agrarian South.

William Watts Ball could not have disagreed more. Watts' 1932 discussion of Tillman in *The State that Forgot* illustrates old-Bourbon type criticism of the movement that destroyed much of South Carolina's Old South tradition of gentility and limited democracy. His thoughts provide insightful explanation into the consequences of this transition, a transition that created the environment in which Rutledge's construction of the past seems anomalous, or simply antiquated. Ball wrote, "Tillmanism brought down the temple of the fathers with a crash, it might have stood some decades longer, it might even have been restored."<sup>110</sup> It will be remembered that Ball advocated the aristocratic nature of Carolina society that predominated from 1790 to 1860. Unlike Tillman, Ball did not view aristocracy as a term exclusively applicable to large-landowners and wealthy Charleston elite. When Ball used the term, he was speaking of a community of landholders, small and large alike, from the yeomanry to the planters, who possessed the right to vote as a result of land ownership. Once again, he did not believe in universal suffrage, for white or blacks. Only those who demonstrated a stake in the outcome of government should be permitted to vote.<sup>111</sup>

This property holding aspect was of most importance to Ball, and Tillman's misunderstanding of it proved disastrous for South Carolina. Tillman drew no distinctions between "classes of opposed economic interest." He joined the landless whites such as the mill workers and tenant farmers, with nothing other than labor to offer to anybody,

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<sup>110</sup> William Watts Ball, *The State that Forgot: South Carolina's Surrender to Democracy* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1932), 229.

<sup>111</sup> Ball, *The State that Forgot*, 286-287.

into a massive and powerful political faction. Tillman then capitalized upon this amalgamation and gained control of state politics. Ball wrote, “The South Carolinians of 1932 are the children and grandchildren of those of 1890, but they pursue different ways and their South Carolina is a different state.”<sup>112</sup> By this he meant that more people were living in textile villages and mill towns than ever before, without want or desire to own land. For Ball, the state had assumed a character of vulgarity, violence, and great indifference towards the lessons of the past; he was concerned that the state had lost its sense of historical consciousness. Ball was an eyewitness of the Tillman movement and its consequences for his state, and to him it seemed as if a genteel conservatism and sense of southern identity had been replaced by a breach of standards and disregard towards the type of society he envisioned and described, an agrarian republic.

Professor William J. Cooper has suggested an “ideological legacy” of the Bourbons, one that created an image of a South united by Confederate defeat. He averred that few southerners between 1880 and 1950 challenged this construction. This is true, but it could also be argued that the closer one hovers towards the latter date, the less southerners were thinking in terms of that construction. As Cooper concluded about the Bourbons, “the defeat they met in 1890 was as final as that of 1865.” Walter Edgar has posited that Tillmanism resulted in a modified form of Bourbonism, one more prone to adapting to change and reform. He wrote, “Tillman and his Reformers wrought some changes in South Carolina; however, they did not tinker with the basic tenets of the Bourbon world-view.” On the other hand, W. Scott Poole has argued, “The conservative aesthetic in South Carolina died with the triumph of Tillman. The ancien regime did not live again.”

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<sup>112</sup> Ball, *The State that Forgot*, 275.

Poole argued that Tillman was perhaps the most influential political figure in the entirety of the state's history. He averred, much like Ball in 1932, that had it not been for the triumph of Tillman at the expense of the older genteel conservatism, the Bourbon image would likely have witnessed revitalization rather than destruction in the 1890s. According to Poole, had the Conservative Bourbons defeated Tillman, the primary twentieth century debate within the state would have been over agrarian values rather than racial segregation.<sup>113</sup>

Whether intentionally or not, Rutledge was writing of the Conservative Bourbon image of southern chivalry and gentility. He wrote in 1937, "I was a born to a world that had been ruined, and to a civilization that had passed. Over my childhood slanted the long shadows of the end of plantation life. Among my earliest recollections are those of my becoming aware that our existence was not a full and natural one." Finally he concluded, "Our family pride seemed all for the past."<sup>114</sup> This is one way through which to understand his writings on South Carolina's southern culture and identity. The affects of Tillmanism are nowhere present in his understanding of the South; his construction of the past resulted from the ancient southern ideal of aristocratic achievement. Rutledge wrote in the tradition of William Gilmore Simms and Henry Timrod; he would not have understood the indecency and decline of public morality that increasingly characterized the immediate and distant world outside of Hampton Plantation. He entertained little notion to do so. As William Cooper wrote of the Bourbons, "The theme of the

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<sup>113</sup> See William J. Cooper, *The Conservative Regime: South Carolina, 1877-1890* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 15, 207; Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 452; W. Scott Poole, *Never Surrender: Confederate Memory and Conservatism in the South Carolina Upcountry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 220-221.

<sup>114</sup> Rutledge, *My Colonel and His Lady*, 128.

Confederacy and of times past pervaded the Conservative mind. The South Carolina Conservatives looked forward not to a better world but to a re-created one. For them, the best of all worlds had existed in antebellum South Carolina.”<sup>115</sup> The same could be said of Rutledge, the son of a southern veteran. Rutledge’s philosophy was one of the past, it was of his father’s Confederate generation. Richard Weaver considered the southern agrarian philosophy as grounded in particular virtues not bounded by time. Weaver wrote, “It is the most arrant presentism to say that a philosophy cannot be practiced because that philosophy is found in the past and the past is now gone.”<sup>116</sup> Rutledge’s understanding of the southern past guided his perception of the modern order, and allowed him to exist apart from it.

The writings of Archibald Rutledge describe a Bourbon conception of the South. They illustrate a traditional construction of southern history and culture, and particularly South Carolina’s place within it. He was a man fending against his time. His reverence for the country gentleman ideal and his admiration for lowcountry plantation culture, as a product of both white and blacks, constituted two major themes of his writing during the 1930s and 40s. This plantation culture he described was agrarian, conservative, feudal, and mature. Both ideals had witnessed considerable decline since mass democracy and racially, caste-structured politics had gained predominance with defeat of the old regime in the 1890s. Considering life at Hampton after 1937 the same as it was in the time of his father’s generation, Rutledge overwhelmingly succumbed to “a memory of those days.” His memory of the Old South, he would say, had been cultivated by his own recollection,

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<sup>115</sup> Cooper, 20.

<sup>116</sup> Weaver, *Southern Essays*, 11.

family history, tradition, and conversation with those whose memory stretched beyond the Civil War. His writings, then, serve as an insightful and instructive articulation of this collective/personal memory and understanding. Bearing in mind Elizabeth Daniel's description of him as the quintessential exemplar of southern gentility, Rutledge illustrated his vision of a South seemingly long since forgotten, "there are the true and loyal hearts beating there which make her the forgiving and generous South, the South chivalrous, the South impatient of wrong, of injustice, of ingratitude, the South deeply read and long practiced in the oracles of personal honor and integrity."<sup>117</sup> Just as Rutledge described the Colonel and the lowcountry blacks of Hampton, his writings reveal a man who existed as a living link with the distant past.

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<sup>117</sup>Rutledge, *God's Children*, 50.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### AN AFFECTIONATE VISION OF THE PERMANENT THINGS: BEN ROBERTSON

One historian called him “As loyal a son as South Carolina and the South ever produced.”<sup>118</sup> Ben Robertson’s 1942 *Red Hills and Cotton* provided for its readers an image of the South and its lasting traditions. Robertson was born to Benjamin Franklin and Mary Bowen Robertson on June 22, 1903. Hattie Boone McKinnie, Ben Robertson’s great grandmother, was the great niece of Daniel Boone. His father was a member of the first graduating class of Clemson University, his mother an alumna of Winthrop, his maternal grandfather William T. Bowen a veteran of the Confederate Army. Grandfather Bowen served two terms as state senator from Pickens County and was sent by his constituency as a member of the 1895 state constitutional convention. The influence of Ben Tillman within this family is conspicuous. Tillman was instrumental in the creation of both Clemson and Winthrop Colleges. The constitutional convention was almost single handedly the product of his efforts. When he was seven, Robertson’s mother died. Although his father remarried at a later point in time, Robertson’s upbringing was the work of his mother’s parents. He lived with them and experienced their stories and perspective of the South as members of the Confederate generation. Robertson graduated from the Clemson- Calhoun high school in 1919 and earned a degree in science from Clemson in 1923. One of his classmates was Strom Thurmond of Edgefield. Deciding on a career in journalism, Ben relocated to the University of Missouri where he worked on a

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<sup>118</sup> Lacy K. Ford, introduction to *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory* by Ben Robertson, Southern Classics Series (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), xi.

graduate degree under Walter Williams. Breaking from his studies, the Charleston *News and Courier* employed Robertson for a year in 1925. Herbert Ravenel Sass was then the general editor of that news publication. He finished his degree in journalism in 1926 and wrote for several publications throughout the 1930s, including the *New York Herald-Tribune*. In 1940 Robertson accepted a position at *PM*, an upstart daily published out of New York. As a journalist for this paper, he frequented Europe and covered the British- and American-war efforts. In 1941 Robertson received a furlough and returned to South Carolina where he wrote *Red Hills and Cotton* from September until early December. Alfred Knopf published the book during the summer of 1942. Earlier that year, he returned to Europe as a *PM* war correspondent and covered the Russian theatre of the conflict. In January 1943 Robertson resigned from *PM* and accepted a position as London bureau chief of the *Herald-Tribune*.<sup>119</sup>

In many ways, Robertson's initial chapter in *Red Hills and Cotton* is the most revealing; it sets a good stage. To understand the book, one must first comprehend the meaning of the first several pages. Robertson considered it a blessing from God to have been born in South Carolina. He understood an ordered allegiance with South Carolina first, the South second, and the American Union last. The state, the South, with all their peculiarities was older than the union, older than a United States. Robertson throughout uses the plural "we" in reference to his family of generations past. The history of the South was familial and personal to him, just as it was for Sass and Rutledge. Robertson averred that the South had voted to form a union, that it could rightfully, and did rightfully, vote to dissolve it. He wrote of his grandmother Bowen who had witnessed

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<sup>119</sup> Ford, introduction to *Red Hills and Cotton*, xv- xl.

Confederate defeat. To her America was the finest portion of the world and South Carolina possessed the best land within it. Mrs. Bowen spoke of Carolina singularly as being the southern portion of the original colony. North Carolina was different to her; there were distinct disparities in her mind. The state did not exist until 1689 and had refused to nullify as South Carolina did in 1832. These were for Mrs. Bowen legitimate reasons to chastise the old north state. Her intense devotion to South Carolina reveals a deep affection for place and identity in Robertson's lineage for the state of his birth. Not only did his family remember the Confederacy, but they also imagined a much older history still relevant to them in the early twentieth century.<sup>120</sup>

Robertson told his readers that for nearly two centuries each member of his family lived and farmed in the South Carolina upcountry. He labeled it a paradise and revered the society his family helped engender. The imagery he provided was immensely agrarian in nature and an instructive description of the farming communities of the southern past. To Robertson the upcountry of his youth was a simple yet majestic land of smokehouses, sweet-potato patches, flower and vegetable gardens, cooked fruit pies and country dinners, of swimming pools in a creek, apple orchards, Confederate veterans, tenant farmers, black people, politicians and preachers. He was not describing something he had read or witnessed pictures of in books or on the screen; his was not a whimsical creation of mental imagery, but rather an articulation of and tribute to the South of his youth, a South he saw was changing and had changed considerably since his boyhood. This is one aspect of Robertson that separated him from Sass and Rutledge, and yet never detracts from the underlining similarities between the three. In other words, he was not concerned

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<sup>120</sup> Ben Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory*, Southern Classics Series (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 3-4.



about reaffirming the Old South system of economy or society or about constructing an image of the South as a plantation aristocracy. His was a story based upon an experience of the twentieth century South as the land of farmers and commoners, not planters and elites. He was, however, like Sass and Rutledge, overtly interested in portraying an agrarian, traditional, and redoubtable South of honor, virtue, and Christian sensibilities. Therein exists a major theme among all three writers.<sup>121</sup>

Robertson depicted his family as a Bible believing lot, a kinship of farmers, southern Democrats and Baptists, a people who venerated ancestry and tradition; they were not afraid of doing the same things again and again as the ancestors had done. The substance of his family was a crop of cotton, a herd of cattle, and thousands of acres of land. They had little money, which was beside the point; they grew the things that most people bought. Continuing his illustration, Robertson believed his family was from the strongest stock of southern blood. They were the people of the old Carolina backcountry who carved a way of life out of the wilderness and established a society of self-reliance and self-determination. His family believed in work, talking with friends and neighbors quite frequently, and maintaining an established decorum of southern manners. To Robertson, it was essential for a southerner to maintain honor, to never live in disgrace, and to abide an old code of ethics.<sup>122</sup>

Robertson remembered the South he belonged to as a good and valiant country of spirit, diligence, and prudence. His knowledge of the South and its history was based upon his personal experience coupled with conversation. Conversation was important to him. It served as the most effective catalyst for an older generation to instruct the younger

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<sup>121</sup> Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton* 3-5.

<sup>122</sup> Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 7-9.

in the ways of the traditional South. He wrote of many conversations between his family members. Some were stories, others were arguments, but all were instructive. Robertson used the image of chimney smoke to express how these conversations would vanish with time, and all that would be left is the remembered. There was a single and constant theme Robertson recognized in all his recollections of this talk: the struggle of a certain people to create and maintain a particular, set, desired manner of living; this is an overwhelming sense of continuity. His elders told this history of America and South Carolina's place within that story to Robertson. He recognized nothing wrong with such a mode of learning; it created pressure to perform one's duty. Occasionally Robertson would allude to the idea that duty to one's self, family, and generations past is of most importance.<sup>123</sup>

Robertson fundamentally understood his upcountry home as a community of southern conservatism, and he explained why this had always been the case. Robertson wrote, "It is lost wars that age a people in their country, and we have lost more than one struggle in South Carolina." He continued with mention of a Spaniard conflict in 1702, a bout with Indians in 1761, lost battles at the hands of the English, and of course the Confederate defeat. From Robertson's perspective, Charleston and Columbia had witnessed great tragedy during the state's history. Prior to 1914, Charleston was one of the most besieged cities in history, and the statehouse in Columbia still held the scars of Sherman's artillery. People are able to forget conflicts they win, but are nearly incapable of forgetting defeat. Even before C. Vann Woodward, Ben Robertson understood what defeat meant for the South. For Robertson, the South was able to transmogrify trouble into virtue; it was trouble that bestowed a correct perspective, "a kind of sorrowful sympathy and

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<sup>123</sup>Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 13-20.

understanding,” he continued, “and no matter what comes up, we can usually find within our rich experience some precedent to steer us.” Reflecting the understanding of Sass and Rutledge, Robertson averred, “We almost alone in our small Southern state directed the history of the American Union from 1830 up to 1860.” His conclusion, “We are conservative because of our troubles and because of our age.”<sup>124</sup>

Robertson wrote that while he was growing up, his family was still influenced by a sense of loss; they had lost the type of country they wanted, an agrarian, Jeffersonian conception of republicanism. “We had been nailed to a Northern economic system by a sort of Northern Cross; almost we were strangers stranded in our own country.” He wrote earlier within the same chapter that his family understood the image of futility and loss portrayed in Sass’s *Look Back to Glory*. Everywhere and anywhere, Robertson wrote, the South of his youth remained flabbergasted as a result of defeat. There was an immense sense of futility, so many men having fought and perished for an embattled cause, “They could not bear that, so they resurrected all the dead.” The Confederate veteran made a point to tell the story of the South and the Civil War to his children and grandchildren, “They gave those dead young soldiers a new life in a glowing personal legend.” Echoing the sentiments of William Faulkner, Robertson revealed the primary point of his understanding of the southern past, “The past that Southerners are forever talking about is not a dead past, it is a chapter from the legend that our kinfolks have told us, it is a living past, living for a reason. The past is a part of the present, it is a comfort, a guide, a lesson.” Nothing could be clearer than Robertson’s respect for the lessons of the past; it is clear that he viewed the southern experience as capable of reasonable guidance and

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<sup>124</sup> Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 23-25.

motivation. He articulated and reaffirmed, for the benefit of others, a southern tradition in the memory of those who lived successfully and accomplished character during a previous time.<sup>125</sup>

As the final point in his opening chapter, Robertson recognized no lost cause. It was his opinion that the North had seceded from the original American ideal, not the South. To him the South had wished to perpetuate the ingenious vision of the Founders. Robertson wrote, “It was not the Confederate army that lost, the Southern cause was never the lost cause, my grandfathers have assured me of that.”<sup>126</sup> To Robertson, the South was thrust into the difficult decision between liberty and submission and, having duly chosen the former, the Southern Confederacy was their attempt to preserve the principles of ’76 by way of the final remedy: irrevocable secession. This was nothing new with Robertson, of course. Jefferson Davis spoke in 1861 to the Montgomery delegation of newly confederated Alabamians, “The Constitution framed by our fathers is that of these Confederate States.” As a man of much political experience and learning, no man was more cognizant of this fact than Davis. He concluded his speech succinctly and pertinently, recognizing his commission as the leader of a cause with precedent, “Reverently let us invoke the God of our fathers to guide and protect us in our efforts to perpetuate the principles which by His blessing they were able to vindicate, establish, and transmit to their posterity.”<sup>127</sup> This idea was simple and well known to Davis, as well as Sass, Rutledge, and Robertson; it was a pivotal aspect of their southern conception.

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<sup>125</sup>Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 26-28.

<sup>126</sup>Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 29-30.

<sup>127</sup> Jefferson Davis, *Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist: His Letters, Papers, and Speeches*, vol. 5, ed. Dunbar Rowland, LL.D. (Jackson, Mississippi: Press of J.J. Little & Ives Company, 1923), 53.

Robertson revealed a South and a southern philosophy based upon an admiration for the past and a high regard for family and kinship. According to Robertson, everything he experienced was a product of his ancestors' lives; he viewed them as him in another time. It was the ancestors who taught his generation to have faith, perform duty, and to have responsibility. Robertson averred that the influence of previous generations pressured those living to make something of themselves; there was no sense of atomistic individualism or self-centered desire for personal independence. He understood the South to be a community of families resting upon the accomplishments of the elders. To elaborate the point, Robertson wrote, "The one discipline we have demanded of everyone is that he live his life with honor. A man must have a personal standard in a personal state." The standard was set by the past. Robertson acknowledged southern mannerisms and decorum as nothing that could have been created or maintained without respect for the history of the southern experience.<sup>128</sup>

Robertson wrote, "Relationship is irrevocable in our worn and beautiful hills." This idea of family and relationship provides an excellent parallel between Robertson and the Vanderbilt Agrarian Andrew Lytle. Lytle demonstrated in his novels that family was the foundation of traditional southern culture and society, a society that found its greatest example in the communities of the Old South. His first chapter in *A Wake for the Living* described the ideal in detail. Fundamentally, Lytle viewed the land and the family that inhabited it as the backbone of southern sense of place and identity. He wrote, "I want to make a grand leap in time and say that the stable force of the state is the family."<sup>129</sup> By

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<sup>128</sup>Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 45-46.

<sup>129</sup>Andrew Lytle, *A Wake for the Living* (Nashville: J.S. Sanders, 1975), 5.

this he meant that the family in private life is made up of all its members and personal connections; in public, it is a member of a larger community, or the state. The guiding principle of the southern family, according to Lytle, was a keen sense of the past, the southern past, and an astute knowledge of the accomplishments and errors of previous generations, both of the old and new worlds. This is the most conservative of principles, “For if we dismiss the past as dead and not as a country of the living which our eyes are unable to see, as we cannot see a foreign country but know it is there, then we are likely to become servile.”<sup>130</sup> Without a sense of place, a sense of one’s position in history, there can exist no sense of identity or actual worth. According to Lytle, the southerner should always realize the significance of his inheritance, lest he should be placed at a great disadvantage, this inheritance being that of family, and that family’s role in the history of a particular community.

Lytle and Robertson’s vision of the southern community, made up of southern families, was part of a larger theme that southern traditionalists were articulating during the twentieth century. These writers perceived community as a social fabric of the old and new generations, each enjoying the company of the other, and learning from the different experiences. From this perspective, southern culture at its finest celebrated the gifts of life, the communion of people, and the simple pleasures of the agrarian lifestyle. “The young and old alike talked about the only thing there was to talk about, themselves, their companions, their secrets, their social doings. Of course business was done, but the general interest was the inexhaustible complexities of the actions of human beings.”<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Lytle, *A Wake for the Living*, 4.

<sup>131</sup> Lytle, *From Eden to Babylon*, 12.

These actions were governed by a valuable tradition, one not concerned with the abstract notions of progress or equality, but devoted to family and community.

Robertson wrote of his Grandfather Bowen in much the same way that Rutledge wrote of his father, the Colonel. Both Rutledge's father and Robertson's grandfather served in the Army of Northern Virginia. Robertson described his grandfather thus, "Our stern Grandfather Bowen was a Southern gentleman, a leader in South Carolina, and he worked in the fields all his life along with the rest of the hands." The reader was told that Grandfather Bowen was a stern and dignified man; he was lean, heavy shouldered and erect, and the image of a soldier. He had blue eyes filled with kindness and gentility, and his gray beard was likened unto that of Robert E. Lee. Bowen had been a Hampton Red Shirt and a member of the Klan after the Civil War, and served his county as its senator in the South Carolina General Assembly. "My Grandfather Bowen was forthright and direct and simple; he trusted men, put them on their honor. I think the ever nearness of death during the four years of the war had developed those qualities in my grandfather." It is apparent that Robertson's grandfather was a man of simple pleasures and veracious sensibilities; the image the reader received was one of an honorable, astute observer of the southern scene. This man had thought a great deal, as Robertson wrote, about the South and its condition. It was from his grandfather's philosophy that Robertson checked his own understanding of the southern tradition. And from the perspective of family that he advocated, this was as it should have been.<sup>132</sup>

Grandfather Bowen disparaged the banking and corporate system of the North and made no attempt to equip his family to succeed within it. He considered it a disgrace for a

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<sup>132</sup>Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 74-76.

man to make his living in a bank or in a large company store. Robertson wrote of his grandfather's constant admonition to his family to never sell a foot of land; as long as the family owned its land free of mortgage, it could forestall its involvement in the Northern economic system of debt, credit, and usury. This was merely one lesson that Grandfather Bowen bestowed upon his children and grandchildren. Robertson claimed that a great deal of one's education during his time was derived from the elders, his grandfather's instruction being a case in point, "He gave us time, energy, his money. He seemed to think that the purpose of one generation's living was to help the next- a generation was obligated to all past generations for what it had, it was obligated to the future generations in that it must keep up and improve and pass on the land and the tradition." Just as his grandfather instructed him, Robertson wrote his memoirs to continue the lessons of a southern tradition. He wrote of this, "We were all a part of the procession, the past, the present, the time to come."<sup>133</sup>

Robertson described the essential ingredient of his grandfather's philosophy as the product of an austere and self-disciplined man. He claimed, "My grandfather was certain about many things, sure in an unsure time; and in an age that was grasping he advised us not to grasp. He believed in success, but he had his own quiet definition of that term, success was a thing within, it was the how of achievement." Robertson's grandfather did not believe in his time; he warned his family to fend against attitudes anathema to the southern mentality of agrarian simplicity. He charged the Northern factory system as embodying an uncivilized way of life, "The factory system smothered the individuality of life, it killed a man's inner glow." Like Rutledge's father, Bowen did not think of work as

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<sup>133</sup>Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 84-85.



the purpose of existence, but rather a necessary means to an end. He believed men should control their time and allow for periods of solitude when one could think and ponder a bygone era and its depth of meaning. As a final sort of eulogy, Robertson averred of his grandfather, "According to the standards of the South, he lived a true life, for he was at rest with himself, and he was happy as any man could ever be who was not in sympathy with his time."<sup>134</sup> In Robertson's eyes, his Grandfather Bowen lived as an exemplar of the South's finest gentility, a useful and pertinent apotheosis in 1941.

Within Robertson's upcountry there had basically always existed a much different community and way of life than what had traditionally predominated in the South Carolina lowcountry. Robertson was fully cognizant of this. Whereas Sass and Rutledge wrote of the plantation aristocracy of Charleston and its environs, Robertson wrote of what he called hickory-nut, homespun southerners, and the backbone of the South. To the upcountry and to Robertson, Charleston was viewed as overly ostentatious, excessively grandiloquent, and more like an ancient city-state. Nonetheless, he realized that Charleston was southern, regardless as to its eccentricities; therein was the central common element that molded the state into a single entity. He asserted that the Charleston idea of plantations and the upcountry idea of farms had a pithy concern in common, and it had been common since the South's beginnings, "both have been against the Northern factory system, both have been fearful of the sort of state the Northern capitalists intended to set up in the United States." Traditional South Carolinians had always, from Robertson's perspective, condemned the use of money to make money; he asserted a constant fear among traditionalists towards an impersonal, mechanical

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<sup>134</sup>Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 95-97.

lifestyle. The common theme Robertson understood, the same theme that brings all three figures of this essay together, was the fact that both in Charleston and the upcountry, conservative South Carolinians wanted a rural state, both for pragmatic and philosophical reasons.<sup>135</sup>

Interestingly, Robertson recognized the continued legitimacy of a rural conception of the South after Confederate defeat. Actually, he reproached southerners for not realizing this. In his book, Robertson asserted that his family never intended to fight the Civil War on the question of slavery. They had “wished to fight on the proposition of a rural against an urban civilization, on human rights against money rights.” This was the identical argument of the Vanderbilt Agrarians. He thought of Confederate defeat as a crippling event for the South, spiritually; it put the South on the defensive yet again. This second defense waned in fortitude because of Confederate defeat. To Robertson, both defensives, that of the Confederacy and post-bellum southern conservatism, were defending the same idea, the conception of the South as primarily agrarian in nature. For Robertson, “we still have our original conception, and we know in our hearts it is right. For us in the South, it is not complicated this time by slaves.” In other words, the southern agrarian tradition was never reliant upon slavery; it continued as a legitimate ideal without that institution. A significant problem, however, was that the same people enacted both defense movements. There needed to be a transmission of tradition to younger southerners, an issue Robertson realized had not been sufficiently accomplished.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 104-107.

<sup>136</sup> Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 105-108.

*The Commercial Appeal* out of Memphis Tennessee reviewed *Red Hills and Cotton* as the prose of an unreconstructed southerner from the most southern of southern states, “There are those who hold that a New South, like a phoenix, arose from the ashes of Appomattox, but Mr. Robertson is not sure of that. The people of the South and their attitude toward their land hasn’t changed much since Lee unbuckled his sword for the last time.” The review continued, “He feels, therefore, it is only natural that in writing of the South of his not so distant boyhood, he views it in the light of a rapidly vanishing generation.”<sup>137</sup> This was precisely what Robertson did. Along with the vanishing generation of Confederates, however, appeared a vanishing interest in maintaining this original southern conception of agrarianism. Robertson wrote in 1937 that he could not understand why the South was increasingly demeaning itself as a debased, inferior, backwards society. He wrote his ruminations, “Why do not Southerners feel that these hills are as beautiful as any in the world, that Southern rivers are just as beautiful, that the restoration of the Calhoun Mansion is just as important nationally as the restoration of any other national home?” Robertson stated that the South had developed a mental problem. It no longer understood or valued its own tradition. To him, the South need not be sensitive to false accusations. It should instead reclaim its original conception and assert the legitimacy of a southern ideal with fortitude, certitude, and alacrity. In an age of increased mobility and atomistic individualism in America, Robertson noticed in the South an age of iconoclasts and abandonment.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> *The Commercial Appeal*, August 16 1942, Ben Robertson Papers, Special Collections, Clemson University, Clemson, South Carolina.

<sup>138</sup> Letter from Robertson to unknown, December 6 1937, Ben Robertson Papers, CU.

Robertson, like Archibald Rutledge, recognized the South as a culture belonging to both southern whites and blacks. Robertson impugned the post-war North and its idea of a national responsibility to liberate the southern blacks from white rule. To him, the North during and since Reconstruction had done nothing to ameliorate the race question. It only exacerbated the problem. Echoing the southern conservative tenet of limited democracy, Robertson concluded that it was not black rule exclusively that had governed South Carolina during Reconstruction, but rather “the worst elements in both the white and black races.” He wrote of the 1876 Red Shirt campaign when Wade Hampton ran and became governor; all his kinfolk were members of the Red Shirts. Robertson professed that the North had freed the blacks by proclamation, but it had done nothing to help blacks try to make a decent living. “The North was not interested in the Negro, it was interested in freeing the Negro.” Importantly, Robertson believed, “The South was interested in the colored people, in a solution of freedom, for the South was the colored man’s home just as it was the white man’s home.” His belief was that the South was the inherited homeland of both southern blacks and whites, and that both races had intended to live together in the South for many years to come. He admonished against rash and quick action in favor of greater racial equality, “Suddenness was not the way. There was too much poverty and too much ignorance for suddenness. We would move step by step, generation by generation, from position to position.” From this perspective, southern culture was a lasting product of both whites and blacks, and both races were defined by it.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Robertson, *Red Hills and Cotton*, 262-263.

Robertson's memoir was reviewed nation-wide in 1942. The reviews supported the argument that Robertson's writing was more than anything else a tribute to the South of his youth, a celebratory reaction in prose, and a bold articulation of an instructive southern tradition. The Raleigh, North Carolina *Observer* recognized Robertson's work as necessary during a time when many southerners were questioning the validity of a southern tradition and who could not decide whether to be proud of the South or pity themselves for having been born there. The review concluded, "This is more than the personal story of one Southerner and how he grew; it is more than the story of growing cotton and living at home. It is a case of the people for a way of life." Understanding the influence of Tillmanism and followers of his ilk, The *Atlanta Journal* reviewed the work thus, "Those who have faith in the South and its future, despite the demagoguery of professional politicians or the sometimes unfair workings of an economic system, will find much to reassure them in 'Red Hills and Cotton.'" The Charleston *News and Courier* wrote, "Mr. Robertson has made a contribution to South Carolina's literature; he has drawn a true picture, and it is and will be preservative, even as the work of the late Ambrose Gonzales, of Herbert Sass, Archibald Rutledge, Glenn Allan, Sam Stoney and others is preservative of our Lowcountry life...." *Time* magazine reviewed the work as "an indigenous statement of the idea for which many Southerners believe the South fought the Civil War—that only those governments are strong which are based on the land and its people, not on factories and the people who own or work in them."<sup>140</sup>

One reviewer with the San Francisco *Chronicle* thought Robertson's book might assist northerners to understand the South, "A book about the South that makes sense to

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<sup>140</sup> *Time*, September 28 1942, Ben Robertson Papers, CU.

northerners is a rarity. This book is that and more.” According to this reviewer, Robertson had gracefully and skillfully explained southern culture and identity in such a way that outsiders could comprehend it, “this book simply tells, in the simplest, story-teller fashion of the sort of people he comes from, the way they feel about the South, their understanding of the issues of the Civil War, the intensity of their patriotism, their agrarianism, their fundamentalism and their pride.” The review recognized the work as an articulation and explanation rather than a justification. It was never Robertson’s intent to defend with this book, but rather to remind southerners of an established and increasingly misunderstood agrarian philosophy, “He states well the case for the rights of an individual over an industrial system, such as the Yankee has tried to impose on the South.” The review continued, “The old suspicion of the motives and general morality of the city, the bank, the institution as opposed to the private independent land-owner appears here with its roots exposed and its soundness verified.” The reviewer concluded of Robertson, “His book is better than a tribute. It opens whole vistas to an understanding of a great part of America.”<sup>141</sup>

Katherine Woods, reviewer for the *New York Times*, wrote of *Red Hills and Cotton* as the work of an erudite South Carolinian, and an able inheritor of its cause. Woods wrote that for Robertson, “...the memory of past sorrow and glory was no mere nostalgic lament.” As Woods asserted, and as this essay argues, Robertson wrote of a tradition more substantial than nostalgia, “It is this book’s permeating distinction that it vivifies an energetic, rugged, democratic and self-confident South, and that it looks back in love and loyalty to the dauntless inspiration of a heritage for today and tomorrow, persistent still.”

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<sup>141</sup> *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 9 1942, Ben Robertson Papers, CU.

Woods wrote of the South as a land where history and philosophy complement each other. In Robertson's book, she noticed an image of the southern past guided by a southern philosophy. From Robertson's mentioning of his family's contributions in the American Revolution to his explanation of what the South had lost after the Civil War, Woods noticed that all action had been precipitated by a southern canon of value. There is little to suggest that Robertson would not have been pleased with this appreciation of his work.<sup>142</sup>

Historian H.C. Brearly wrote Robertson from Nashville, TN, "I think that you have done a charming piece of writing and have made the best plea for agrarianism that I have read." Brearly compared Robertson to the Vanderbilt Agrarians, "These men argue mightily for an agrarian way of life in the South, but their arguments are sentimental rather than realistic as yours are."<sup>143</sup> Although Brearly did not elaborate upon his distinction, the important point is that he clearly and properly associated Robertson with the Agrarians and with a larger movement in favor of rural southern traditions. Even the liberal academician Howard W. Odum thought highly of Robertson's work. Odum wrote in 1942, "Nowhere have I found a more realistic, vivid, and sympathetic portraiture of THE WAY OF THE SOUTH, as it is reflected in the upcountry of South Carolina, with its cultural and historical backgrounds showing their ramifications in the old early American epic."<sup>144</sup> In many ways, Robertson's picture of the South is one of the finest in

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<sup>142</sup> *New York Times*, August 23 1942, Ben Robertson Papers, CU.

<sup>143</sup> H.C. Brearly to Ben Robertson, October 7 1942, Ben Robertson Papers, CU.

<sup>144</sup> Howard W. Odum to Alfred A. Knopf, February 1 1943, Ben Robertson Papers, CU.

favor of an aesthetically appealing and valuable agrarian lifestyle, as many of his 1942 readers believed.

As late as 1982, the Pickens County Historical Society, in the county where Robertson lived, published a piece on Robertson that recognized his book as properly a description of old southern ideals in favor of bucolic ways of life. The article noted that since the 1940s, the upcountry had changed considerably at the hands of an industrialized, diversified machine economy, an economy long since removed from Robertson's image of the agrarian South. The author also noted that within Robertson's county of birth, manufacturing had replaced agriculture as the region's primary source of income. Farmers had "abandoned their red clay hills." Another point made was that many of the social, economic changes had occurred largely as a result of the Second World War. Whereas Robertson was concerned with instructing southerners in the way of the South, since the 1940s, according to the article, an influx of people from areas outside the South had greatly diminished the ideals set forth in *Red Hills and Cotton*. Regarding these changes, the author concluded, "In the final analysis, a different era and society have evolved in the Pickens County that Ben Robertson loved so much. The fate of the once quiet, pastoral life around Pea Ridge was merely an epitome of what happened in a larger unit, the so called New South." From the 1942 perspective, Robertson's work existed as an informative description of a society with many of its older ideals yet intact. But in 1982, after the traditionalist ideals of the South had witnessed decades of rapid decline, the book was read as a mere eulogy for antiquated conservative paradigms long since supplanted by more modern ideals of material wealth and industrial progress.



In June of 1939, the College of Charleston invited Robertson to deliver a message about the South and the Carolina Upcountry. Robertson told his Charleston audience, “We are all Southerners and, being Southern, we are historical. We think from a background of history, or rather we feel from a background of history. We feel in the South before we think.” He asked the members of his audience to examine their attitudes as southerners. He asked them to think about the different images of the South in 1939 that pass through their minds. He mentioned the upcountry image of the 1939 South as that of poor tenant farmers who never happened to “get ahead,” of ineffective demagogues, of eroding farmlands and deserted farmhouses. He described a lowcountry image of the once proud family of the landed gentry, displaced by war and living totally in the past and upon its forgotten glory. The final image was that of a living, prosperous South where farmers attempt soil erosion, diversified agriculture, and a stable tenant system. For Robertson, this final image was the best. He was not advocating that the South become greatly industrialized, but rather that southern farmers should diversify agricultural practices to maintain their farm lives. Dependency on single-crop cotton farming was ruining the South. For him, the best guarantee for the pragmatic side of southern agrarianism was to change the way the South farmed; this only would ensure that the northern factory system would be kept at bay.<sup>145</sup>

Ben Robertson wrote of a southern tradition in hopes that it would instruct those who he knew would eventually bring change to the South. The Robertson who wrote, “We are farmers and we have never accepted the North’s factory system as a civilized way of life,” and that “we wanted to live in a rural country and we had an industrial society

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<sup>145</sup> College of Charleston Address, *The Anderson Daily Mail*, July 1939, Ben Robertson Papers, CU.

forced on us” would not have considered industrialization as the best form of change for the South.<sup>146</sup> When Robertson spoke of adjustment, he was not speaking of southern acquiescence to Hamilton’s America, but rather an approach that would allow the Jeffersonian vision of the permanent things to exist within it. Robertson created an affectionate vision of a southern agrarian tradition. Ultimately, that tradition failed as a prevailing source of instruction to those responsible for ushering in the New South after the Second World War. Robertson was killed in a plane crash on February 22, 1943. His life perished at the hands of forces beyond his control, so too did the influence of the tradition he described in *Red Hills and Cotton*.

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<sup>146</sup> College of Charleston Address, Ben Robertson Papers, CU.

## CONCLUSION

### THE CAROLINA SCHOOL AND THE DECLINE OF SOUTHERN CONSERVATISM

W.J. Cash, born 1900 in Gaffney, South Carolina, could reasonably say of the South in 1940, “The mind of the section, that is, is continuous with the past. And its primary form is determined not nearly so much by industry as by the purely agricultural conditions of that past. So far from being modernized, in many ways it has actually always marched away, as to this day it continues to do so, from the present toward the past.”<sup>147</sup> Increasingly after the Second World War, the old paradigms began to shatter in favor of more modern notions of materialism, secular humanism, and distaste for a preservative permanency. The South industrialized, and younger southerners considered obsolete the older agrarian and very much southern way of life. In the words of Richard Gray, “The Southern codes were breaking up, under the twin pressures of modernization and modernism.”<sup>148</sup>

Although the historical context of the Carolina school places it in a time when South Carolina was still primarily rural, the southern conservative ethos that served as its philosophical foundation did not withstand the adjustments of the succeeding decades. For the three writers here discussed, they participated in a southern paradox; their writings served as affirmations of a valuable southern tradition while simultaneously the idea of southern conservatism witnessed the emergence of its decline. Russell Kirk wrote

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<sup>147</sup> W.J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), x-xi.

<sup>148</sup> Richard Gray, *Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 158.

as early as 1953, while Sass and Rutledge were yet alive, that no longer could it be said that the South obeys any ancient canon of accepted conservative beliefs, merely “conservative instincts, exposed to all the corruption that instinct unlit by principle encounters in a literate age.”<sup>149</sup> To Kirk, conservative ideas yielded to the federal sword at Appomattox; he understood a “progressive vulgarization” that capitalized upon conservative instinct after Confederate defeat. Just as Rutledge pondered why there are quite a few people in the South who are somehow not sufficiently southern, it was Mel Bradford who wrote that one may call themselves southern, and one may call themselves conservative, but that does not mean that one is a southern conservative.<sup>150</sup>

Historian Lawrence Goodwyn wrote in 1981, “Thankfully, few people still care whether Lee or Longstreet lost the Battle of Gettysburg, and growing numbers of Southerners seem less than overwhelmingly concerned that it was lost at all.” Goodwyn concluded this as a “helpful development” in favor of a South that questions the validity and usefulness of its ancient memory.<sup>151</sup> If this statement is correct, then the Carolina schools’ objective of educating a younger generation in the tradition of the South was an act of futility. But in no way does the outcome detract from the historical significance of the twentieth century traditionalist literary movement in South Carolina.

The writings of Sass, Rutledge, and Robertson were part of a final momentous intellectual attempt among southern conservatives to thwart the influence of modernity.

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<sup>149</sup> Russell Kirk, *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Washington D.C.: Regnery, 1986), 182.

<sup>150</sup> Mel Bradford, *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), xiv.

<sup>151</sup> Lawrence Goodwyn, “Southern Paradox,” in *From the Old South to the New: Essays on the Transitional South* edited by Walter J. Fraser and Winfred B. Moore (Westwood, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 237.

Such an effort had been the great crusade of southern conservatism from the antebellum period through the mid twentieth century. Speaking of the antebellum master class in a way intriguingly applicable to these authors, Eugene and Elizabeth Genovese have concluded, “The social and intellectual elite of the master class did shape the culture to a considerable degree, and we endeavor to show...the extent to which they brought their vision and aspirations into harmony with those they sought to lead.”<sup>152</sup> All three authors here studied were descended from large-landowners and members of the old master class/bourbon regime. Just as their antecedents molded South Carolina’s culture, so too do their writings exist as a closing exertion in favor of an older period during the emergence of a new one. That these authors’ collective vision of the South failed to strike a harmonic chord with a significant number of southerners was the fundamental difference between the two attempts. The idea of southern conservatism was no longer capable of shaping southern culture in a meaningful way.

In 1964, James McBride Dabbs of Maysville, South Carolina and Professor of English at Coker College in Hartsville, wrote *Who Speaks for the South?* Dabbs opined, “Also, it seems to me regrettable that people should simply let slip from their memories as great and creative a past as the South has had. I must admit that this easy forgetfulness belongs to the American Way.”<sup>153</sup> The American way was to progress and to look towards the future in pursuit of the American Dream. The South, in its older conservative form, had always existed in opposition to such flighty notions; the Carolina school suggested that

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<sup>152</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene Genovese, *Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6.

<sup>153</sup> James McBride Dabbs, *Who Speaks for the South?* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1964), 329.

such notions engendered not success or grandeur, but rather instability and a lack of well-grounded people with certitude. But South Carolina in 1964 was more American than it had been in the 1930s. Dabbs's expression of regret towards the modern "way" of poor memory shows the point of the Carolina schools' ultimate futility; theirs was an attempt, however futile, to stymie the twentieth century southerners' burgeoning penchant to neglect an understanding of the past.

Sass, Rutledge, and Robertson wrote of a remembered past while an increasing number of younger southerners expressed a waning interest in being guided or motivated by an understanding of value and meaning within the southern tradition. More often during the twentieth century, younger southerners were aware of a previous southern Confederacy without realizing its intellectual precedents and connotation; there was little knowledge of the Confederacy's role within a broader southern tradition or ideology. As Gaines Foster has noted, "The ghosts of the Confederacy had shaped the New South, but in the twentieth century they had become too elusive and ephemeral to define its identity."<sup>154</sup> These authors' works served to promote understanding of a southern culture and identity that would instruct the younger generation on the subject of a valuable tradition in the face of an uncertain future. W.J. Cash wrote of the South in 1940, "In the coming days, and probably soon, it is likely to have to prove its capacity for adjustment far beyond what had been true in the past."<sup>155</sup> Such a statement brings to mind Jim Cobb's previously mentioned proclamation that the story of southern identity is that of continuity within change. The Carolina school understood the inevitability of certain

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<sup>154</sup> Gaines Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, The Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South, 1865-1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 198.

<sup>155</sup> Cash, 429.

degrees of change, but they also realized the necessity of maintaining southern distinctiveness as a principal source of order and stability. According to C. Vann Woodward, “The agrarian way contains no promise of continuity and endurance for the Southern tradition.” The Carolina school suggested agrarianism was the only promise to achieve such goals.<sup>156</sup>

The 1930s and 40s writings of Sass, Rutledge, and Robertson, as members of a South Carolina guild in favor of southern conservatism, then, provide insight into how at least a few southerners within one of the oldest seaboard states constructed a conception of the past intended to instructively influence a rapidly evolving new order. As authors also of the Southern Renaissance, their literature developed a unique view of the southern experience through a more personal familiarity with South Carolina’s significant contributions to it. In the case of Sass and Rutledge, theirs was an image or idea of the Old South as the American apotheosis of an established, chivalric, and genteel Western civilization. For Robertson, the character of the upcountry southern farmer was the finest embodiment of Jefferson’s vision. All three advocated a rural over an industrial society. Finally, all three recognized and articulated the South as not a mere idea, but rather a social reality shaped by a valuable tradition and the remembered past.

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<sup>156</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), 9.

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